

**“Postcolonial Pathology in the Works of Italian Postcolonial Writers  
Carla Macoggi, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego”**

By

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## PREFACE

This project has its roots in my prior formation in medicine and psychology, having attended medical school for two years and having completed a Master of Science in Psychology. During my doctoral studies in Italian literature, I was intrigued by the notable prevalence of “psychiatric disorders” and disturbed identity formation that I encountered in texts by Italian postcolonial authors, Black women Italian writers with familial origins in former Italian colonies in Africa, authors who had been marginalized themselves both personally and professionally by their race, gender, and perceived foreignness. Thus, for my dissertation research, I chose a project that would permit me to intersect my intellectual fields of interest in psychiatry, psychology, and literature, both for scholarly motivations as well as for the patently relevant social-political implications. I decided to investigate the arduous construction of identity in Black diaspora adolescents and young adults as portrayed in selected texts of Italian postcolonial literature. My research included a study trip in the summer of 2016 to the Casa della Memoria e della Storia [“Archive of Memory and History”] in Rome where I consulted the widely distributed fascist-era propaganda magazines, *La difesa della razza* [“The defense of the (Italian) race”]. These documents were important in developing my understanding of the veritable construction of the imaginary of the Italian race, itself critical in forging the notion of the Italian nation, which culminated during Mussolini’s aspirations to resurrect the Roman Empire and, as part of that expansionist project, Italy’s colonial adventure in Africa. Interestingly enough, many of the selfsame discourses of inherently “pure” Italianity and the need to protect it from the invasion/contamination of foreigners (particularly black ones) are recurrent and prevalent today in a renewed era of isolationist and nationalist politics in Italy.

The central question of this project is to consider how selected texts of Italian postcolonial literature portray the disturbance of identity development in adolescents and young adults who are incessantly marginalized by the enduring colonial imaginaries of race, gender, and nationality in contemporary Italy. In the works selected, the fictionalized memoirs of Carla Macoggi and the novels by Ubah Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego, the Black female protagonists have been educated and/or have spent a significant portion of their formative years in Italy, have one Italian parent in some cases, and even view themselves to varying degrees as "Italian." Yet these young women are denied the concomitant dignity and rights of this status since they are black or mixed race and have familial origins in Ethiopia or Somalia, former Italian colonies. Thus, in their own "homeland," the protagonists are inscribed as aliens and, by extension, inferior beings which has a significant impact on their self-concept and mental health.

An important concept in my study is that of "postcolonial pathology," a term which I have adapted for the context of Italian postcoloniality from Ann Cvetkovich's "political depression" in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012) and Good *et al.*'s "social suffering" or "social pathology" as described in their *Postcolonial Disorders* (2008). The *topos* of postcolonial pathology is the common thread that runs throughout my analysis of selected texts of Italian literature; in short, it argues that one's positionality has psychoaffective consequences. Thus, the link between monolithic, negative group identities rooted in persistent, presumed to be true binaries of race, gender, and nationality are causal in psychological disorders and render arduous the complex phase of identity formation in adolescents and young adults. Regarding Macoggi's, Ali Farah's, and Scego's selected literary works, the child and adolescent protagonists experience both violent and insidious forms of racism, misogyny, and nationalism owing to their complex ethnic, national, and linguistic origins, as well as traumatic migratory experiences in two out of three cases, all of which

disturb to various degrees the critical developmental process of forming a whole, affirming self-identity. Consequentially, the disruption of their construction of a healthy concept of self results in veritable psychopathology in the young women, including: confused/diffuse identity, debilitating depression, self-mutilation, eating disorders, panic attacks, suicidal ideation, involvement in destructive romantic relationships, and even involuntary hospitalization for dissociative psychosis. As such, I frame the selected texts of Italian postcolonial authors included in this project as exemplars of inverted *Bildungsroman*. The canonical genre recounts the significant factors in the construction of a coherent identity, typically including the salient life events, influential individuals, and formative experiences that eventually culminate in a *raison d'être*, that is, in a clear, integral sense of self with consonant life objectives in both the interpersonal and occupational realms. Instead, I argue that the literary works under examination by Macoggi, Ali Farah, and Scego relate the obstacles to the same complex process for adolescent protagonists who grow up in contemporary Italy yet are minoritized by race, gender, and nationality and, as inverted coming-of-age novels, the texts follow the dismantling or distortion of an affirming sense of self. Furthermore, the works demonstrate that the protagonists' alienation during a delicate phase of development results in significant psycho-affective disturbances, revealing the causal relationship between the public-social-political sphere and the private-affective realm. Thus, I define as "postcolonial pathology" the etiology of psychological disorders in colonial history and the perpetuation of its archetypes of race, gender, and nationality in modern-day Italy as depicted in postcolonial literature.

This study is important in both its social-political merit and its critical value. Regarding the first, the historical moment of the works under consideration is significant: set in the late Seventies to the Nineties in the case of Macoggi's semi-autobiographical novels to the late Nineties



into the Third Millennium in Ali Farah's and Scego's texts, the texts relate violence perpetrated against the young protagonists which is radicated in their marginalized positionality. Ranging in nature from childhood sexual abuse and rape to coercive adoption of a child to exploitative child labor to exclusion in social settings such as school and work, these Italian postcolonial literary works clearly demonstrate the persistence of colonial hierarchies nearly a half-century after the official conclusion of Italian colonialism, thus, the failed process of decolonization in contemporary Italy. As such, the texts are significant as a form of "letteratura civile"<sup>1</sup> ["civically responsible literature"], in other words, the function of literature as an ethical commentary on society and politics with the aim to modify the same. (Pandolfo 22) To cite only one specific example of the social and political utility of this literature in the Italian context, legal rights under *ius soli* ["right of the soil"] are still not guaranteed to second-generation Italians and, in fact, the current nationalist and isolationist political climate is turning always more against approval of the law. Thus, those children born and/or who have grown up mostly in Italy but whose parents were immigrants are denied automatic citizenship and impeded from access to work and full inclusion in society, even though the Bel Paese is their homeland and they self-identify as Italian. Therefore, as a form of *letteratura civile*, the considered works by Macoggi, Ali Farah, and Scego have the potential to influence politics in Italy. These texts give flesh to the consequences of the laws and a culture on children who are in all effects Italian, yet who are denied Italian identity, by making manifest the deleterious effects of the persistent constructs of race, gender, and nationality on the self-concept and psychological well-being of young black Italians.

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, Pandolfo is speaking specifically about the *corpus* of Igiaba Scego and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's works, yet the concept can be easily extended to Carla Macoggi's texts as well.

Moreover, this study is unique in its critical aspect in that it specifically analyzes the complex interplay among race, gender, nationality and adolescent identity formation and mental illness, questions which have been primarily explored by the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and anthropology, thereby, bodies of information which are not typically accessible to the public. Hence, findings in these fields have little impact in transforming culture and politics. Furthermore, the scientific studies that consider how various categories minoritization and/or migration experiences impact identity construction and mental health in young persons have been conducted mostly in the Anglophone context, being only recently a nascent field in the Italian context;<sup>2</sup> this is relevant in that the conclusions achieved and the recommendations conveyed by American and British institutions are not necessarily generalizable to the particular history and politics in Italy that condition the experience of the otherized adolescent, especially an individual who has undergone a traumatic migration experience as is the case in two of the three texts under consideration. Thus, these texts constitute a veritable new literary genre, that is, they can be considered as inverted *Bildungsroman* in that they relate the manner in which tenacious colonial binaries of race, gender, and nationality disrupt the construction of a healthy, positive identity in minoritized individuals and even provoke politically- and culturally-induced psychopathology.

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<sup>2</sup> See Roberto Beneduce's *Etnopsichiatria: Sofferenza mentale e alterità tra storia, dominio e cultura*, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2007. The field of ethnopsychiatry, briefly, considers mental disorders as a direct consequence of marginalization by race and nationality and/or traumatic migratory and war and refugee experiences and is an emerging field in the Italian context with its center at the Frantz Fanon Center in Turin which was founded in 2000.

## INTRODUCTION

### I. HISTORICAL-CRITICAL PANORAMA OF ITALIAN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE: FROM *LETTERATURA ITALIANA DELLA MIGRAZIONE* TO *LETTERATURA POSTCOLONIALE ITALIANA*

The birth of *letteratura italiana della migrazione*<sup>3</sup> ["Italian migration literature"] in 1990, nearly three decades ago, can be linked to an historical event: the homicide of South African laborer, Jerry Essan Masslo, during the night of August 24, 1989 near Caserta. Four masked, armed aggressors assailed twenty-nine undocumented immigrants robbing them of two months' earnings

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<sup>3</sup> Since its inception nearly three decades ago, Italian migration literature has passed from an initial phase of invisibility both in the academic and commercial markets, to a phase of labeling and framing and the critical conundrum of whether and how to include these texts in the literary canon. The multitude of designations that have been applied to literary works in Italian language composed by immigrants or their descendants to Italy represent this struggle. The various terminology used to frame this literature includes: Quaquarelli's use of "letteratura italiana dell'immigrazione" ["Italian immigration literature"] which she adapted from Armando Gnisci's coining of "letteratura italiana della migrazione" ["Italian migration literature"]. Quaquarelli includes the prefix "im" to emphasize these works' belonging in the Italian literary tradition, as well as to situate them within the national context in the geographic and political sense. Lidia Curti, instead, employs the moniker "letteratura della diaspora" ["diaspora literature"] in that the term "literature" is privileged, and the disqualifier of "immigration" or "migration" is eliminated; moreover, "diaspora" underlines the multicultural aspect of the works given that the authors have origins in other countries/territories, some in former Italian colonies; additionally, her term links these works to other postcolonial literature. Graziella Parati adopts a related label, "letteratura multiculturale italiana" ["multicultural Italian literature"], while Fulvio Pezzarossa utilizes "letteratura del mondo" ["world literature"] or "scrittura migrante" ["migrant literature"], the latter being the moniker that he adopted for the academic journal that he founded *Scritture migranti*. Roberto DeRobertis argues that the latter terms: "pone l'accento sulla pratica e su una disponibilità costante alla trasformazione...(letteratura come) un potente strumento di costruzione e re-invenzione." ["places the accent on the practice and on the constant availability to transformation...(literature as) a powerful instrument of construction and re-invention."] The etiquette "letteratura italiana postcoloniale" ["Italian postcolonial literature"] will be the term preferred in this study for the literary works selected, as is explained in the Introduction to this study, which distinguishes them from "letteratura dell'immigrazione," while yet recognizing the latter category as valid and distinct from the former. For an exposition of the various terminology employed to refer to the various phases and forms of Italian postcolonial literature, see Quaquarelli "Introduzione" pp. 10-12.

from their labor as tomato pickers in the province of Campania. Masslo was shot four times in the abdomen after he refused to surrender his hard-earned wages. Masslo's funeral was transmitted nationally by RAI, a prominent Italian television channel, which provoked numerous anti-racism demonstrations in many cities in Italy, one of the most massive and important being the Pro-Migrant Rally in Rome on October 7, 1989.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these protests led to the founding of the first *Convenzione antirazzista italiana* ["Italian Anti-racist Convention"] in Florence in December 1989, the first coordinated effort to battle for rights to citizenship for undocumented migrant workers. Masslo's death inspired several immigrants of African origin living in Italy to release their literary accounts of his homicide and/or their own experiences with racially-motivated marginalization and violence, the first being Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun's short story "Villa Literno" (1990), entitled for the small town in Campania where Masslo's homicide took place. Written *a quattro mani* ["by four hands"] together with journalist Egisto Volteranni, Jelloun's tale recounted Masslo's violent death and was published in the collection *Dove lo stato non c'è. Racconti italiani* ["Where the state is not: Italian short stories"] (1991), along with other stories composed by undocumented African laborers in the south of Italy who were constrained to live in subjection to abuse and illegal, unjust wages by their Italian *caporali* ["unlawful recruiters of day laborers"]. The same year, two book-length autobiographies written in Italian by immigrants were published: *Immigrato* ["Immigrant"] (1990) by Tunisian author, Salah Methnani, in collaboration with Mario Fortunato, and *Io venditore di elefanti* ["I, elephant seller"] (1990) by Senegalese writer, Pap Kouma, co-authored with Oreste Pivetta, as well as the brief memoir of Italian-

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<sup>4</sup>In her *Immigrazione e cittadinanza: auto-organizzazione e partecipazione dei migranti in Italia* (2007), Claudia Mantovan highlights, however, that collaboration between the Italian organizers and migrant activists was difficult: the former insisted on retaining control of the organization of anti-racist movements due to their greater familiarity with Italian law, politics, and bureaucracy, revealing a power dynamic even in pro-immigrant rallies and organizations. (Mantovan 81)

Ethiopian Maria Abbebù Viarengo “Andiamo a spasso” [“Let’s go for a stroll”] (1990). Other works released successively by immigrant authors to Italy were: *La promessa di Hamadi* [“*Hamadi’s Promise*”] (1991) by Senegalese Saidou Moussa Ba, *Chiamatemi Ali* [“*Call me Ali*”] (1991) by Moroccan author Mohammed Boucane together with Carla De Girolamo and Daniele Miccione, and *La tana della iena* [“*The Hyena’s Lair*”] (1991) by Palestinian writer Hassan Itab, in collaboration with Renato Curcio.

Caterina Romeo, in her essay “Italian Postcolonial Literature” (2017), identifies a so-called “first phase” of Italian (im)migration literature from 1990 to roughly 1994, which she characterizes as literary production that was typically stimulated by a news event, an historical episode, but mostly personal lived experiences. (Romeo “Italian” 5) Distinguished by their substantial autobiographical content, frequent themes of the first phase of migration literature include: an accounting of a painful migratory experience, a denouncement of the racism encountered by (mostly black) immigrants to Italy, and the difficulties associated with establishing a dignified life in the Bel Paese as an *extracomunitario* [“undocumented immigrant from outside the European Union”], a denomination which many have noted has racial undertones. As previously mentioned, many of these texts were composed *a quattro mani* [“by four hands”], that is, in collaboration with a native speaker of Italian who was frequently a journalist or professional author owing to the “necessity” to have the language revisited. Thus, the great majority of the texts in this phase could be considered as “collective autobiographies.”<sup>5</sup> (Romeo “Italian” 6) In addition, works from the

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<sup>5</sup> Caterina Romeo employs the term “collective autobiography” in “Italian Postcolonial Literature” (2017) to refer to any autobiographical work that “is the result of a collaboration between a narrator/author and an editor/author, (who is) often described as an ‘editor,’ ‘contributor,’ or ‘co-author.’” Romeo highlights that the co-author’s/editor’s contribution is “not only linguistic” due to the narrator’s lack of mastery of the tongue used to compose the work, but is also as a “cultural mediator, helping with the clarity and readability of the text and helping the storytellers make contact with the publishing market.” Importantly, Romeo problematizes the narrator/author and editor/author rapport as a “power relationship.” (Romeo “Italian” 6, my insertion)

first period of Italian migration literature typically included a plethora of extra-textual elements, such as a lengthy introduction by an “authentic” Italian author, the inclusion of a chronology of the events discussed in the literary text, as well as copious explanatory notes provided by the native Italian speaker. (Quaquarelli “Introduzione” 14) Co-authorship, what Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla refer to as “split authorship,”<sup>6</sup> and the belief that additional textual elements were necessary to accredit the veracity of the story tended to discredit the authority of the migrant author and further marginalize both the writer as well as his/her literary work. For these reasons, during this first phase, Italian migrant texts were considered “extra-literary” as defined by Alessandro Portelli: “(they were) perceived primarily as a document, a spontaneous and artless testimony, and hardly ever as a conscious effort of artistic expression...(as such) these authors received no attention from students and scholars of Italian literature.” (Portelli 473, my insertions) Similarly, Quaquarelli notes that Italian migration literary works were frequently viewed as “fuori dal testo” [“outside of literary text”] or “pre-letteratura” [“pre-literature”] with a predominantly political, social, or historical value rather than literary. (Quaquarelli “Introduzione” 14-15) Thus, the Italian migrant literature production from 1990 to 1994 was minoritized as “pre-literature,” “minor literature” or, at best, “letteratura italoфона” [“Italophone literature”] and, therefore, not taken into consideration as part of the literary canon. (Quaquarelli “Definizioni” 54) Beyond being disregarded by the Italian academy, first phase migrant literature was discounted as well by book publishers: these works were not distributed at the national level, being promoted mostly on the street by “colporteurs,” itinerant peddlers of art. (Quaquarelli “Introduzione” 15) Nonetheless, the predominantly autobiographical texts released during the first period of immigration literature

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<sup>6</sup> In *Migrant Cartographies* (2005), Daniela Merolla and Sandra Ponzanesi trouble the co-authorship of many texts of the first phase of Italian migration literature, arguing that the “split authorship” usually implied also “split authority,” given that it often involves significant “manipulation” of the “immigrant grammar” to make it acceptable for Italian publishing houses. (Merolla and Ponzanesi 33)

were significant in that, for the first time, the racialized Other spoke for him/herself to the Italian public, refuting the often “percezione monolitica di indesiderabilità” [“monolithic perception of undesirability”] by conferring a more complex, humane representation of self and one’s experiences. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 14)

Caterina Romeo in *Riscrivere la nazione: La letteratura italiana postcoloniale* [“*Rewriting the nation: Italian postcolonial literature*”] (2018) is unique in identifying a second, transition phase of Italian migration literature, from 1995 to 2000, which she characterizes as “un periodo di orientamento, in cui si assiste a un graduale abbandono della scrittura a più mani, ma anche di rafforzamento in cui le identità artistiche di alcuni scrittori e scrittrici si corroborano, altre emergono, mentre si comincia a istituire premi e nascono riviste specifiche.” [“a period of orientation, in which we witness a gradual abandonment of co-authorship, but also of consolidation in which the artistic identities of some authors (male and female) are validated, others emerge, and prizes begin to be awarded, and specific journals are born.”] (Romeo *Riscrivere* 5) Romeo characterizes this “transition phase,” as she calls it, by the wider range of authors, genres, themes, and stylistic elements in comparison to the first phase. Another key development she notes was the institution of literary prizes and academic magazines dedicated exclusively to migration literature, signaling the inauguration of recognition by the publishing industry and the Italian academy. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 19) Romeo cites as examples the establishment in 1995 of the literary competition Eks&Tra, founded to recognize excellence in literature composed by “migranti, figli di migranti e coppie miste.” [“migrants, (and) the children of migrants or mixed couples.”] (Romeo *Riscrivere* 14) Additionally, the *Caffè: Rivista di letteratura multiculturale* [“*Cafè: The Journal of*

*multicultural literature*”] had its debut in 1994 and, in 1997, Armando Gnisci<sup>7</sup> at the Sapienza University in Rome, established a data base called BASILI or “Banca DATi degli Scrittori Immigrati in Lingua Italiana” [“Data BAsE of Immigrant Writers in Italian Language”], to which was added a journal *Kùmà: Creolizzare l’Europa*, no longer published, in 2000. Among other significant phenomena during this phase, Romeo highlights that a collaborative group of writers with African origins was born in Rome in 1997, *Scritti d’Africa*, who counted among their members Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, one of the authors considered in this study. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 14) Romeo also outlines important developments in both content and style which emerged during this second phase. In regard to innovative formal elements, she includes linguistic experimentation with Italian that included “foreign” terms as well, sometimes translated, sometimes not, the motivations for which will be discussed in this project; the inclusion of terms from other semantic fields, such as the local Italian dialect of the protagonist, an important element in Igiaba Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) as will be discussed in this study; Italian youth jargon, also prevalent in Scego’s text; and language from other artistic genres such as hip-hop. Regarding original themes explored in the works of this period, Romeo identifies: “il rapporto tra singolo e società...intorno

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<sup>7</sup> In Caterina Romeo’s *Riscrivere la nazione: La letteratura italiana postcoloniale* (2018), Armando Gnisci and Graziella Parati, from the Italian and United States contexts in 1998 and 1995, respectively, are credited with initiating the debate on how to classify literature written in Italian by immigrants and/or their descendants. Romeo observes that this debate was/is relevant for both literary criticism considerations—“quali siano i criteri di inclusione ed esclusione attraverso cui il canone letterario e culturale italiano ha operato” [“what are the criteria for inclusion or exclusion via which the Italian literary and cultural canon had operated (until then)”]—to also sociopolitical and philosophical questions: “interrogarsi....su...chi possa essere considerato italiano a tutti gli effetti e su quale sia il ruolo sociale...che spetta a tali soggetti...(in breve) interrogarsi...su ciò costituisce ‘italianità’ e su quale norma—sia essa somatica o culturale—sia necessario rispettare per essere inclusi in questa categoria privilegiata.” [“to interrogate oneself...on...who can be considered Italian in all respects and on what social role...these subjects are entitled to...(in short) to interrogate oneself...on what constitutes “Italianness” and on what norms—either somatic or cultural—is necessary to conform to to be included in this privileged category.”] (Romeo *Riscrivere* 1, my insertion) In this author’s point of view, the discussion opened by Parati and Gnisci three decades ago is still relevant given that Italian postcolonial literature is still not (fully) considered by the Italian academy as part of the literary canon and, regarding the political-philosophical questions posed by Romeo, citizenship is still not granted automatically to children born on Italian soil to immigrant parents, to cite only two examples.



all'effetto straniante che la nerezza del protagonista produce" ["the rapport between the individual and society...around the estrangement that the blackness of the protagonist produces"]; "il tema della dualità" ["the theme of duality"]; and "la complessità insita nella nozione stessa di 'identità italiana'" ["the inherent complexity of notion itself of 'Italian identity'"]. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 14-19) Therefore, according to Romeo, the transition phase of Italian immigration literature from 1995 to 2000 signaled a new recognition of the literary value of these works as evidenced by the institution of academic journals and literary prizes, but also by a greater complexity and experimentation in the literary genres and styles employed by the authors themselves, necessary steps which would culminate in the advent of Italian postcolonial literature around the year 2000.

A different divide is drawn by Lucia Quaquarelli and others who distinguish writers and, thus, periodization of Italian migration literature by the linguistic and cultural provenance of the authors. Quaquarelli highlights the emergence of the so-called "G2/generazioni seconde" ["second generation"] writers,<sup>8</sup> that is, those born in Italy to immigrant parents or those who have spent the majority of their formative years in the Italian cultural and educational environment. (Quaquarelli "Introduzione" 15-17) Among others, Quaquarelli enumerates as the first notable publications by G2 authors: Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo, Congolese who relocated to Bologna at age four, and his novel, *Rometta e Giulio* (2001); Gabriella Kuruvilla, born in Milan to an Indian father and an Italian mother, and her novel *Media chiara e noccioline* (2001), published under the pseudonym Viola Chandra; and Igiaba Scego, one of the authors included in this study, born in Rome to Somalian parents, and her short story "Salsicce" ["Sausages"] (2005). Scego was awarded the Eks&Tra prize for migrant literature in 2003 for her short story which was published along with

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<sup>8</sup> Quaquarelli traces the origin of the term "second generation," used to describe the children of immigrants, to sociologists at the Chicago School in the early 1900s. (Quaquarelli "Introduzione" 18)

other notable submissions in the 2005 collection *Pecore nere: Racconti* [*Black sheep: Short stories*"]. Yet, Quaquarelli problematizes the denomination "G2 author" acknowledging its racial undertones since it is usually employed to refer to black/brown authors and/or those from the global south.<sup>9</sup> She questions for how many generations these writers will be referred to as foreigners or immigrants, therefore, marginalized. (Quaquarelli "Introduzione" 16) Noting the connection between their minoritization in the literary canon and their political status given that second-generation Italiians are not automatically conferred Italian citizenship due to the denial of *ius soli*, Quaquarelli qualifies that G2 is synonymous with "illegitimate children" in the nation in which they were born and raised. (Quaquarelli "Introduzione" 18)

Turning to *letteratura (italiana) postcoloniale* ["(Italian) postcolonial literature"], Sandra Ponzanesi was the first to adopt the term in her 2004 "Il postcolonialismo italiano: Figlie dell'impero e letteratura meticcia" ["Italian postcolonialism: Daughters of the Empire and mixed-breed literature"]. In her essay, Ponzanesi makes a distinction between postcolonial literature and *letteratura della migrazione* and *letteratura transnazionale in generale* ["transnational literature, in general"], as she refers to them, even though she concedes that there are multiple "contaminations" among the categories. (Ponzanesi "Postcolonialismo" 29) She differentiates Italian postcolonial literature from its predecessors in two senses: in the most "restricted" one, to Italian literary works that "emerge" from the former Italian colonies of Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia,

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<sup>9</sup> To cite only one example of the racial connotations of "G2 author" or even "immigrant author," the highly prestigious Premio Strega awarded annually for contemporary Italian literature was won this year by Helena Janeczek for her novel *La ragazza con la Leica* [*The girl with the Leica camera*] (2018). On the Strega's website, a brief biography of Janeczek describes her as "nata a Monaco da Baviera in una famiglia ebreo-polacca, vive in Italia da oltre trent'anni." ["born in Monaco di Baviera, in southern Germany, in a Hebrew-Polish family; she has lived in Italy for more than thirty years."] Thus, as is glaringly obvious, Janeczek is not described as an immigrant or even migrant author, instead, her "belonging" to Italy and, thus, her right to compose in Italian and even win prestigious literary prizes seems to be conferred by her whiteness and by the length of time which she has lived in Italy, rights which are not bestowed on black authors who were born and raised in Italy to immigrant parents who are frequently still referred to as G2 or migrant writers. ([premiostrega.it/PS/helena-janeczek/](http://premiostrega.it/PS/helena-janeczek/))

and Libya and, in a more encompassing, critical sense that considers its nature and operations.

Ponzanesi defines Italian postcolonial literature as:

...letteratura opposizionale, che mira alla destabilizzazione del canone tradizionale, e dei regimi di rappresentazione tra l'essere italiano e essere altro, a tutte le varie scritture migranti in lingua italiana (albanesi, brasiliane, africane, medio-orientale *sic*, slave e così via). (Ponzanesi "Postcolonialismo" 29, author's aside)

[...oppositional literature, which aspires to the destabilization of the traditional (literary) canon, and the regimes of representation between being Italian and being Other, (to include) all the various migrant writings in Italian language (Albanian, Brazilian, African, Middle Eastern, Slavic, and so on).]

Thus, the provenance of the author who composes in Italian is not the only, nor even necessarily a fundamental element, in qualifying Italian postcolonial literature, but his/her approach and/or objectives in reforming the Italian literary canon and in disrupting essentialist representations that divide Italians from the Other. The quote from Françoise Lionnet (1989) that Ponzanesi inserts at the beginning of the piece indicates what she considers "postcolonial": "...un concetto di solidarietà che smitizza tutte le glorificazione (*sic*) essenzialiste delle origini unitarie, siano esse razziali, sessuali, geografiche o culturali." ["...a concept of solidarity that debunks the myths of monolithic origins, whether they are racial, sexual, geographic or cultural."] (Ponzanesi "Postcolonialismo" 25) Ponzanesi clarifies, as is the general consensus, that all migrant writings do not constitute *letteratura postcoloniale*. She draws a diachronic divide, a critical one, and a linguistic one between the two: she remarks that the first works, *letteratura della immigrazione* or *letteratura italoфона*, that emerged at the end of the nineteen-eighties were frequently autobiographies, what she calls "ego-documenti" ["self-documents"], or testimonies that were written by those for whom Italian was not a first language. Nonetheless, Ponzanesi credits this first phase as indispensable in revitalizing the Italian literary canon inasmuch as the latter is "mortifera e incapace di fornire nuovi sistemi di rappresentazione." ["dead and incapable of furnishing new systems of representation."] (Ponzanesi "Postcolonialismo" 34)

In her later book chapter, “The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies” (2012), published nearly a decade after her introduction of the term “Italian postcolonial literature,” Ponzanesi observes that Italian postcolonial studies “is still in its infancy” which she attributes to many factors, both historical and political in nature, many of which will be examined in this study. As a partial list, she includes: “the absence of an independence struggle” between Italy and its African colonies which led to “historical oblivion” as well as “legacies of instrumentalized and nostalgic memorizing.” (Ponzanesi “Postcolonial Turn” 52) In other words, Ponzanesi attributes, in part, the lack of revolutionary wars against the Italian colonizers in its colonies as contributing to the amnesia of the atrocities committed, which permitted a persistent nostalgia in Italy of its colonial adventure, as well as granted space for revisionist histories of it to be promulgated after the war.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, she attributes the as yet infancy stage of Italian postcolonial studies to the “slow and indifferent response to the development of cultural studies” in the Italian academy.<sup>11</sup> this has

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<sup>10</sup> See Alessandro Triulzi, “Displacing the Colonial Event: Hybrid Memories of Postcolonial Italy” (2007) for a perspective on the contemporary reprisal of a whitewashed version of Italy’s colonialism in Africa, what he calls a “revival” of an “idealized and assertive colonial memory.” (Triulzi 430) Triulzi frames this resurgence of the *italiani brava gente* myth as a reaction to the last two decades’ immigration of former colonial subjects to Italy. He notes that the “all-endorsing and sanitized shared (colonial) memory” is necessary to support “feelings of belonging and national unity” which justify “feelings of cultural and race superiority” and, thus, the exclusion and marginalization of immigrants to Italy. (Triulzi 430) Similarly, Norma Bouchard frames the renewed “mythology of national identity based on imaginary notions of shared civic values, territorial belonging, and even a common ethnicity” as “reactive” to the migration of individuals from the global South. (Bouchard 191-192) She attributes the renaissance of monolithic Italian identity, *italianità*, as a significant factor in provoking contemporary racial violence against immigrants, and in the legislation which deprives immigrants to Italy of social and political rights and full inclusion into society, for example, the Martelli Law of 1990, the Turco-Napolitano Law of 1998, and the Bossi-Fini Immigration Law of 1992. (Bouchard 192) Bouchard notes the irony in the fabricated myth of unified Italianness given that Italy has historically been a “mosaic of independent cultures, traditions, and even ethnic identities that, to date, constitute the mosaic of the ‘Smaller Italies’;” she cites Antonio Gramsci’s “The Southern Question” which argues that “Italy” was founded on emigration and colonization, specifically, Northern Italy’s colonization and exploitation of the South of Italy in order to achieve Unification. (Bouchard 193-196)

<sup>11</sup> In her chapter “The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies” (2012), Ponzanesi draws parallels between the Italian academy’s reluctance, which she characterizes as ranging from “indifference” to “hostility,” to a postcolonial approach and cultural studies in general to that of other European nations who were also former colonizing powers, namely, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. She traces the historical and political reasons of such. (Ponzanesi “Postcolonial Turn” 53-56)

limited scholars to the investigations conducted by North American and northern European academics whose findings are not directly transferable to the Italian context,<sup>12</sup> thus, not generalizable. (Ponzanesi “Postcolonial Turn” 52) In her 2012 essay, Ponzanesi refines her definition of Italian postcolonial literature which retains some of the original elements she had utilized in 2004. First of all, she differentiates between a “technical” sense of the term and an “intellectual” one. The “technical” sense is akin to the prior “restricted” meaning yet more precise, referring to works composed by highly educated, full Italian citizens, multi-mother tongue authors with parents who hailed from a former Italian colony in Africa. (Ponzanesi “Postcolonial Turn” 52) In this vein, Ponzanesi lists Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ali Farah, and Gabriella Ghermandi as exemplary Italian postcolonial authors, commenting that origins are important since, being “native informants,” a term she adopts from Gayatri Spivak, they are:

...capable of presenting the experience of the outsiders with the language of the insiders...they choose to address their complex origins in a postcolonial way, emphasizing issues of resistance, in-betweenness, writing back, and embracing a poetics of relations, multiplicity, ambivalence, and subversion. (Ponzanesi “Postcolonial Turn” 52)

The latter part of her definition, the “intellectual” meaning of Italian postcolonial literature, refers to the critical approach that the authors employ in resisting, troubling, and dismantling bivalent, monolithic categories of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, geography and culture, returning to Françoise Lionnet’s quote. These works, instead, present third spaces of “multiplicity,”

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<sup>12</sup> The exceptionality of the Italian case in comparison to other Western nations’ postcolonialities is addressed in the Introduction to Lombardi-Diop and Romeo’s *Italian Postcoloniality: Challenging National Identity* (2012), as well as in the Introduction to Contarini, Pias, and Quaquarelli’s *Coloniale e postcoloniale nella letteratura italiana degli anni 2000* (2011/2012). Briefly, the latter authors note that Italy is differentiated from other European/Western countries by: its historical, political, socio-economic division between the North and the South; the divide between the islands and the mainland; the tension between standard Italian language and the multiple dialects in Italy; and the influx of immigrants to Italy, historically a “nation” of emigration, which began in the nineteen eighties. (Contarini, Pias, and Quaquarelli 9)

“contamination,” and urge for societal and political transformation. (Ponzanesi “Postcolonial Turn” 60-61)

A similar yet distinct definition of what constitutes Italian postcolonial literature<sup>13</sup> is presented by Caterina Romeo in *Riscrivere la nazione: La letteratura italiana postcoloniale* (2018). Like Ponzanesi’s “technical” definition of the genre, Romeo underscores the provenance of the writers and the language they adopt: “...la letteratura scritta in italiano in Italia da scrittori o scrittrici migranti e/o dai/dalle loro discendenti” [“...the literature written in Italia by male and female migrant writers and/or by their descendants”]; she later clarifies the import of the origins of the authors who hail from or have familial ties with nations with which Italy had a colonial rapport.<sup>14</sup> (Romeo *Riscrivere* 1, 9) Additionally, Romeo frames Italian postcolonial literature as representing a “third phase” that differentiates these works from (im)migration literature, dating the genre from 2001 to the present. She also underscores the critical nature of this literature, as does Ponzanesi, but brings to the forefront the import of History and the authors’ intentions to “rileggere e riscrivere la storia e la cultura italiana” [“reread and rewrite Italian history and culture”]. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 2) Specifically, Romeo characterizes Italian postcolonial literature by:

...(spesso) un carattere oppositivo e si articola attraverso controstorie fortemente critiche nei confronti del passato coloniale italiano e del modo in cui l’eredità che esso lascia informa la contemporaneità postcoloniale. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 20, author’s parenthesis)

[...(often) an oppositional character and it expresses itself via strongly critical Counter Histories against the Italian colonial past and the way in which the heredity which it left informs the postcolonial present.]

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<sup>13</sup> For yet another reflection on what differentiates *letteratura della migrazione* from *letteratura postcoloniale italiana*, see Lucia Quaquarelli, “Gli altri autori” (2011/2012).

<sup>14</sup> Romeo is unique in her differentiation between “letteratura postcoloniale diretta” [“direct postcolonial literature”] and “letteratura postcoloniale indiretta” [“indirect postcolonial literature”]. The distinction is based on whether the writers have a direct or indirect link with Italian colonialism, that is, whether they or their ancestors came from the Horn of Africa or Libya. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 20, 27) She creates a separate category for Albanian-Italian literature. (23)

Romeo's definition underlines the continuity and the persistence of the paradigms of Other constructed during Italy's colonial period and their enduring impact on contemporary Italian culture and politics. Likewise, in the prior study that she co-authored with Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (2012), the authors clarify that "postcolonial" in the Italian context "is beginning to be employed to explore the historical continuum and cultural genealogy that link the colonial past to contemporary history" which aims to "reposition colonial history and its legacy at the center of the debate on contemporary Italy." (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2) In addition to the operation of the "re-reading and re-writing Italian history and culture," Romeo adds in her latter 2018 work, *Riscrivere la nazione*, that Italian postcolonial literature demands an analysis of how *italianità* ["Italianness"] and, thus, Italian national identity are currently constructed: she problematizes the notion of *italianità* by demonstrating its relationship to Italy's long history as an emigrant country which, in and of itself, is related to its colonial period as the colonies were imagined as potential lands of opportunities for poor Italians from the south. In this regard, Romeo holds that Italian postcolonial literature examines the continuation of "le relazioni di dominio" ["power relationships"] of coloniality and how they are "riprodotte" ["reproduced"] in Italy today, which will be a significant part of this analysis. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 2-3)

This study will utilize the postcolonial approaches to literary analysis formulated by Ponzanesi, Lombardi-Diop, and Romeo, among others,<sup>15</sup> in tracing the ghosts of Italy's colonial

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<sup>15</sup> For an excellent overview of the approaches adopted and the themes addressed by Italian postcolonial literary criticism, see *Coloniale e Postcoloniale nella letteratura italiana degli anni 2000* edited by Silvia Contarini, Giuliana Pias, and Lucia Quaquarelli (special volume of *Narrativa*, no. 33-34, 2011-2012). The volume contains the acts of an international conference held at the Paris Nanterre University in 2011 on: "Coloniale e postcoloniale nella letteratura italiana degli anni 2000" ["The colonial and postcolonial in Italian literature in the 2000s"]. The conference was the culmination of a multi-year study project directed by Silvia Contarini on "Letteratura del tempo presente: La questione identitaria nell'Italia del XXI secolo" ["Present tense literature: The question of identity in twenty-first century Italy"]. (Contarini, Pias, et al. 7-8) In the Introduction, the curators of the volume specify that "postcolonial"

past to the contemporary constructions of race, gender, and nationality and considering how these hierarchies are inscribed on the bodies of the protagonists in selected texts by Carla Macoggi, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego. This analysis is novel in its approach, however, by its focus on the psychoaffective consequences of these hereditary power dynamics on the Black female diaspora protagonists, a concept which will be deemed as “postcolonial pathology.” As such, the study will engage with texts from cultural studies, black feminism, anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry, including those of Ann Cvetkovich, José Esteban Muñoz, Michelle Wright, Good *et al.*, Frantz Fanon, and Erik Erikson, among others. It will be demonstrated how “disordered states,” with the continuity of power relations established during colonialism, are responsible for and causal in the psycho-affective disturbances/sufferings identified in marginalized individuals, referred to as “social suffering” by Good *et al.* or “political depression” by Ann Cvetkovich. (Good *et al.* 10-11) Moreover, this study will examine the detrimental effects of these hierarchies during a critical period of development when the protagonists are constructing their very notion of self, from late childhood to late adolescence. To examine these questions, Lacan’s mirror stage theory will be enlisted, as well as Frantz Fanon’s notion of the “epidermalizing” mirror of racism, Kelly Oliver’s paradigm of the “reversed mirror stage,” and Michelle Wright’s theory of the erasure of

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does not refer to a specific historic period, nor a separate discipline, neither a particular body of literature defined by language and/or geography. (Contarini, Pias, *et al.* 8) Instead, they clarify that they employ “postcolonial” to mean “...una prospettiva della contemporaneità, una prospettiva teorica che investe discipline, paesi, storie e letterature diverse, e impone di ripensare categorie e metodi di analisi e comprensione dei fenomeni (anche letterari), sulla base di una critica definitiva all’imperialismo coloniale, all’espansionismo e ai nazionalismi, e nell’urgenza di restituire la parola all’altro (e all’altra), al diverso, al subalterno. Se l’esperienza coloniale sembra infatti appartenere al passato, essa tuttavia, per le modalità e le circostanze con le quali il suo ‘superamento’ si è realizzato, si insedia al centro dell’esperienza contemporanea (Mezzadra), prolungando il suo ‘post’ all’infinito, facendone il nostro oggi.” (Contarini, Pias, *et al.* 8, authors’ asides) [...“a perspective on contemporaneity, a theoretical perspective that strikes at disciplines, countries, histories, and various literatures, and insists on rethinking categories and methods of analysis and understanding of phenomena (also literary ones), on the basis of a decisive criticism of colonial imperialism, of expansionism, of nationalisms, and the urgency of restoring the word to the Other (and the female Other), to the different, to the subaltern. If the colonial experience seems, in fact, to belong to the past, nonetheless, for the ways and the circumstances with which its ‘obsolescence’ was achieved, it (the colonial experience) is positioned at the center of contemporary experience (Mezzadra), prolonging its ‘post’ to infinity, making itself our today.”]



the Black diaspora female even in counter-discourses. Lastly, the selected works of Italian postcolonial literature will be framed as inverted *Bildungsroman* or capsized coming-of-age novels, in that they recount the deconstruction/deformation of these young protagonists' very identity. It will be shown that the distorted mirrors of race, gender, and the constructed myth of the ethnic and national homogeneity of the Western European nation, the latter described by Paul Gilroy in "Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity" (1993), deform and deconstruct the young Black female diaspora protagonists' sense of self and, thus, result in grave psychopathy.

## **II. DECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY BY RACE, GENDER, AND NATIONALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY: INVERTED *BILDUNGSROMAN* IN ITALIAN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE**

Selected texts of several Italian postcolonial authors, namely, Carla Macoggi, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego, will be considered as exemplars of inverted *Bildungsroman*, that is, as novels which recount the (de)formation of identity construction in the minoritized adolescent protagonists, consequently provoking significant psychopathology in them. In the four works that will be examined closely—Carla Macoggi's *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011) and *La nemesi della rossa* (2012), Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's *Madre piccola* (2007), and Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* (2008)—the protagonists are children who have grown up either exclusively or predominantly in Italy and who have at least one parent whose origins lie in former Italian colonies in Africa, specifically, in Ethiopia and Somalia. As they are attempting to navigate the complex period of identity formation, these youths are incessantly subjected to and assigned to monolithic, negative group identities rooted in the persistent colonial binaries of race, gender,

and nationality. Even though the protagonists have been prevalently educated in Italy or in Italian schools, have spent all/a great part of their formative years in the Bel Paese, have secure legal-political status thanks to the Italian parent, and even view themselves to varying degrees as “Italian,” they are not regarded as such and are denied the concomitant dignity and rights of this status. Owing to their complex ethnic, national, and linguistic origins, their “territorialized bodies” are read as “black” and “alien” (Hesse 646): hence, these young individuals are necessarily strange, inferior, and extraneous Other in Italy, the context that they consider “home” in most cases. As a consequence of their blackness and perceived foreignness, even though all are Italian citizens, the adolescent protagonists in the narratives under consideration experience both violent and insidious forms of racism which complicate the developmental process of forming a whole, affirming self-identity. Moreover, their disrupted identity formation is causal in producing a wide spectrum of psychopathy in them, ranging from debilitating depression to self-mutilation to bulimia to panic attacks to hysterical mutism to suicidal ideation to outright psychosis.

In confronting an argument that confronts identity construction in adolescents, one must begin with the seminal work of psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, the father of adolescent identity formation, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). Current psycho-social research on adolescent identity formation continues to depart from Erikson’s text and his assertion that the construction of identity in adolescents is a complex interplay between *soma*, *psyche*, and *polis*; Erikson frames the biological hormonal and corporeal changes in the adolescent, the *soma*, as being accompanied by a crisis in the ego of the individual, the *psyche*, who interrogates him/herself: “Who am I?”, “What do I want to become?” and “What *can* I become?” (Erikson 289) He holds that successful resolution of the critical period will result in a cohesive sense of wholeness/identity in which the young person can imagine a “tangible collective future” for

him/herself, that is, as a respected, contributing member of his social group. (Erikson 49) Importantly, Erikson departs from Freud in including the political-social-historical context, the *polis*, in which the youth finds him/herself as critical to the identity formation process: the environment may support or, alternately, place constraints on the possibilities that a young person envisions for him/herself and, thus, achieves. Erikson cautions that “conditions of economic, ethnic, and religious marginality provide poor bases for any kind of positive identity.” (Erikson 88) Thus, according to Erikson, an adolescent relegated *a priori* to an “inferior,” disfavored social group has two options: one is that s/he may adopt a “negative identity” to which s/he has been pre-assigned by the social-political environment and the particular historical moment. Erikson qualifies this process as a “negative conversion” in which the young individual is compelled to select among “caricature” identities for his social group. (Erikson 310, 313) Fixed, negative identities available to black youth in both the European and American contexts may include: the buffoon; the intellectually slow or unmotivated, unreachable student; the gifted musician; the oversexed (in the extreme, the male rapist or the rape-able female); the exceptional athlete; the ultra-spiritual; the violent criminal; the drug user/pusher; the absent, irresponsible father; the welfare mother; and, in the Italian/European context, the undocumented, “illegal” immigrant. All of these preconceived, essentialist negative identities reinforce the marginalized adolescent’s sense of “worthlessness and helplessness.” (Erikson 310) The second option, according to Erikson, is to reject the pre-appointed caricature roles and, since the minoritized youth finds minimal support from the *polis* to explore other ones, s/he may be unable to navigate the ego identity process altogether. Erikson frames this as “identity confusion” or “identity diffusion” in which the young adult is unable to establish a firm sense of self as a “worker” and a “lover,” the two fundamental roles that comprise a healthy personality according to Freud, which provides a shaky, problematic

foundation for successive adult developmental tasks such as: intimacy versus isolation in young adulthood, generativity versus stagnation in middle age, and integrity versus despair in the autumn of life. (Erikson 94)

However, even though Erikson mentioned race and its role in disrupting identity formation, it was not brought to the forefront in his identity theory. Therefore, this analysis of difficult identity construction in black women protagonists will employ Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) in which race is central to the construct of self. Fanon departs from Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory to address the interplay between race, colonial power constructs, and identity. Specifically, he utilizes the metaphor of the mirror to represent the distorted reflection of racism that the black child must confront via his exposure to the white gaze. In a chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* entitled "The Black Man and Psychopathology," Fanon sustains that the distorted reflection of self that the child experiences under white (dis)regard represents veritable "psychic trauma" and, that since this trauma is repeated, continuous, and inescapable, it will result in the "collapse of the ego" of the black child. (Fanon *Black Skin* 122, 132, 139) He holds that "a normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world;" it is not until the child is exposed to the white gaze that s/he feels the "weight of his melanin." (Fanon *Black Skin* 128) Fanon explicitly employs Lacan's mirror stage theory in his text to explain the concept of the black man's "inferiority complex." He argues that the white man's gaze, due to his "Negrophobia,"<sup>16</sup> deconstructs the black man, reducing him from a human being to a mere "bodily image," to his epidermis, to a "non-ego," via the dehumanizing process of "epidermalization." (Fanon *Black Skin* 139) Kelly Oliver, in her *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001), expands on Fanon's postulated collapse of the black child's ego by arguing

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<sup>16</sup> Fanon's use of Negrophobia is explained in detail in the first chapter on Macoggi's text.

that the racialized Other undergoes a “reversed mirror stage” when subjected to the white gaze. Oliver recalls the reader that Lacan posited that a “specular I,” the reflected image of self that the infant sees in the mirror, brings about his/her internal representation of self, the *Imwelt*. The *Imwelt* successively “sets up the social I,” the baby’s notion of oneself as a social being, the *Umwelt* for Lacan, who interacts with the outer world. (Oliver 30) Lacan held that the child experiences his identity as “split” and “alienating” in that the fragmented, partial image of him/herself reflected by the mirror does not represent the ego/Ideal I, that is, how s/he conceives of self, therefore, the child learns that what seems to be real cannot be trusted. (Lacan 5) Oliver argues that the racialized Other experiences an ulterior alienation, what she calls a “double alienation,” which has its origins in the social-political reality of racism that s/he must continually confront: “The pathological mirror of racism has the opposite effect of the Lacanian mirror. Rather than produce the ego with its agency as a fictional defense against alienation, the alienation in the mirror destroys the ego.” (Oliver 32-33) She refers to Fanon’s “reduction to epidermis” of the black individual and contends that: “In the mirror of white domination the black body is not reflected as a whole or an active agent but as ‘animal,’ ‘bad,’ ‘mean,’ ‘ugly,’ and not human. In the reversed mirror stage, racism, through epidermalization, reduces the ego to skin, not even a fragmented body.” (Oliver 32-33)

It must be confronted, however, that in addition to the deforming effects conferred by race on the black child’s ego, gender is another fundamental element of objectification,<sup>17</sup> a central thesis

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the multiple and additive dimensions of marginalization that Black women experience, see Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989) and her later “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color” (1991). Both are fundamental texts in black feminist thought which theorize the intersections of several dimensions of discrimination on the lived experiences of women of color, including race and gender, but also socio-economic class and nationality. Very succinctly, Crenshaw claims in the second essay: “...many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood...the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately...race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational

sustained by Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004). She claims that Blackness, as an essentializing, nullifying identity, “cannot be...produced in isolation from gender and sexuality.” (Wright 4-5) Wright observes that the Black female is erased even in the counter-discourses of intellectuals of African descent, naming Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. DuBois, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. She condemns the fact that:

(they) speak of the Black subject only as “he” and allocate to that subject full agency, leaving little room for (and even less discussion of) the Black female subject...Black women, even when they do appear in these texts, are background objects and therefore are placed even lower than the white female, who is at least granted some agency. (Wright 11, author’s aside)

Furthermore, Wright rejects outright the abject Other’s plea for recognition that is typically a fundamental element in counter-discourses, noting that having to beseech for one’s visibility as “fully human” remains trapped within the power binaries of white/black, male/female, European/African, citizen/alien, among others. Instead, Wright proposes the “Black mother” as a model of “intersubjectivity” for the Black diaspora individual meaning that, between mother and child, subjecthood is both mutually conferred and mutually affirmed. Wright, like Fanon and Oliver, engages with Lacan’s mirror stage but she positions the Black mother as the mirror, instead of the white gaze. She maintains that the child “recognizes her (the mother) as both Other and conflated with self” since the hierarchically ordered, “strictly defined borders” of nation, race, gender, and class disappear in their rapport. (Wright 178-179, my insertion) Describing their rapport as “dialogic” and “intersubjective,” as in mutually conferred and mutually affirming, Wright holds that the Black mother-child mirror furnishes a reciprocal reflection which consists in

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aspects of violence against women of color.” (Crenshaw 1244) Crenshaw’s thesis of the intersectionality of multiple axes of minoritization is essential to this analysis of the experiences of the Black/*meticcìa* female protagonists in Macoggi’s, Ali Farah’s, and Scego’s literary works. Intersectionality is also the framework which guides Caterina Romeo’s analysis of protagonists in Italian postcolonial literature in *Riscrivere la nazione: La letteratura postcoloniale italiana* (2018). (Romeo *Riscrivere* 47-50)

“complex intersubjects informed by and informing each other.” (Wright 159) Since the Black mother and child are united by and mutually validated by blood/biological bonds, by generational continuity, by similar positionality, and by history (family history, shared homeland, and social-political reality), the erasure/epidermalization/dehumanization that occurs via the hegemonic white gaze (“white” here with its multitude of signifiers meaning white race, male, European/American, heterosexual, properties) is expunged in the mother-child rapport. Therefore, Wright argues that the “Black mother is the point of orientation for all Black subjects.” (Wright 178) Nonetheless, she cautions that even though dialogic intersubjectivity is achievable for the racialized Other via rapport with the Black mother, it does not annul the realities of the *polis*, what she calls the “materialist dialectics” or lived experiences that the individual will face when dealing with subjects in more hegemonic positions. Yet the subjectivity conferred by the Black mother-child rapport has the possibility to create and strengthen the ego/sense of “I” which can serve as a fortress when facing oppression.

This analysis engages with Erikson’s (and more recent psychologists’) theorization on identity construction, modifying it with Fanon’s and Oliver’s models of epidermalization of the racial Other and Michelle Wright’s paradigm of the invisibility of the Black female, to consider how identity is deformed/deconstructed in three black female protagonists with origins in former Italian colonies in representative works of Italian postcolonial literature. The historical moments represented in the texts are an important consideration in this study: the selected narratives take place decades after the conclusion of Italian colonialism and two of the three novels are even situated in the early 2000s in contemporary Italy. Consistent with Cristina Lombardi-Diop’s and Caterina Romeo’s characterization of Italian postcolonial literature as demonstrating the continuity in the contemporary era of the colonial dichotomous categorization by race, gender, and nationality

of human beings, among other binaries, the Black female diaspora protagonists of Macoggi's, Ali Farah's, and Scego's works are anachronistically subjected to the same Manichean dichotomies decades after the conclusion of the colonial era, in some cases, a half-century afterwards. This is evidenced by the wide gamut of the negation of their very personhood, many instances of which are horrifying and criminal, including: repeated (and ignored) child rape; adoption of a child by intimidation and under false pretenses; enslavement of a child as unpaid labor; child abandonment; verbal, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse and assault; separation from one's natural parents due to civil war and racially-based immigration laws; and, in all cases, the constant questioning of one's identity and right to belong even though all of the protagonists are documented Italian citizens.

In addition to the historical-social-political factors which impede the assembly of a positive identity in these youth, many of the parental figures in the texts are physically or psychologically absent, thus, they do not or cannot buffer their children from the negative impacts of race, gender, and perceived foreignness. It has been demonstrated that "positive racial socialization," that is, having a parent(s) who provides a healthy role model rooted in one's racial/ethnic group, as in Wright's archetype of the Black mother, can protect adolescents from "race-related stressors." (Brittian 175-176) A strong parental figure who presents an edifying image of one's race/heritage furnishes a firm foundation on which the adolescent can create an edifying concept of self, notwithstanding constant degradation by hegemonic groups, and by which s/he can learn to manage marginalization in a non-destructive way. However, many of the adult figures in the Macoggi's, Ali Farah's, and Scego's narratives are compromised in their ability to parent: they have personally suffered civil war in their home countries, lost home and close family members in traumatic ways, and undergone harrowing diaspora experiences. In the texts, the parental figures



struggle to resolve their legal status, to find remunerative work, to establish a stable, dignified home for their children, and to build a social support network in a context in which they are subjected to the same alienating Hegelian racial and nationalistic dialectics as their children. As a result, many of them, as well, suffer from socially and politically-induced mental illnesses, mostly depression, which ultimately thwart their ability to parent and result in abandonment of their children in some cases. Consequently, the adolescent protagonists, who are attempting to navigate the critical crisis of identity construction in an ambient in which they are defined *a priori* as racial, outside-the-nation female Other, are inadequately supported by their parents, further exacerbating the critical phase of determining who they are and what they can become. Due to inadequate positive, strong parental role models on how to “be” black, female, and Somalian/Ethiopian/Italian in the European context, as well as continual affronts on their own ego by the social-political context in the Bel Paese, these youth succumb to identity diffusion which manifests variably as: inability to establish salubrious romantic relationships, paralysis in exploring possible career paths which would avail of their talents and capabilities and contribute to a sense of self-worth, and, in all cases, *bona fide* psychopathology including depression, panic attacks, eating disorders, self-harm, and attempted suicide.

In regard to “remedies” or solutions for deformed and diffuse identities and politically-induced melancholy, Michelle Wright’s archetype of the edifying force of the Black mother as a pillar for identity construction is significant in the literary works under consideration, however, mostly by way of her absence, either physical or psychological. Instead, the protagonists of Macoggi’s, Ali Farah’s, and Scego’s works seek alternative foundations on which to base self worth and, thus, identity. These include: substitution with surrogate parental figures or female role models (who are Black diaspora subjects themselves), academic achievement, meaningful work, psychotherapy,

and, in all cases, narration of self. In relation to the latter, the “trauma narrative” paradigm and “narrative identity” theory, current therapeutic models in the field of psychology, will be demonstrated as curative in the absence of the Black mother in identity construction in the Black diaspora female in Italy.

### III. CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

The first chapter of this study examines Carla Macoggi’s two fictionalized memoirs which take place in 1970s Ethiopia and in the 1970s through 1990s in Italy, primarily in Bologna. Macoggi’s first text, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011), relates the separation of a nine-year-old *meticcica* [“mixed breed”] child protagonist from her Black, Ethiopian natural mother when she is adopted coercively by a white, Italian woman. The Italian woman exerts her privilege conferred by race, nationality, and class to intimidate the child’s impoverished widowed mother into relinquishing her daughter to her, thereby, the Italian “acquires” a child as a commodity, much like a slave. *Kkeywa* concludes with the emotional breakdown of the little girl who screams uncontrollably for her mother as she departs for Italy with her new adoptive “mother.” This analysis frames *Kkeywa* as an inverted coming-of-age novel which recounts the deconstruction of a child’s identity via the deforming white gaze of the Italian surrogate mother. Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage theory is put into conversation with Frantz Fanon’s exposition of the “epidermalizing” racial mirror which reduces the black individual to ego-less skin to explain how the nine-year-old protagonist in *Kkeywa* is transformed from the beloved, treasured daughter of her Black Ethiopian

mother to the mute “piccola schiava” [“little slave”] of her white Italian master, no longer worthy to be protected or cared for. Moreover, *Kkeywa* highlights the persistence of power dichotomies rooted in the colonial constructs of race, gender, and nationality. First, the child protagonist’s mother’s “marriages” to two Italian military officers in the late 1960s and early 1970s are configured according to the colonial *madamato* concubinage paradigm from decades prior; in short, she serves as the temporary comfort wife of the two men while they are residing in Addis Abeba and bears children to them, including the protagonist of *Kkeywa*. Yet, both men summarily discard her and their offspring, the first when he returns to his state-sanctioned family in Italy, abandoning his child just as so many *meticci* children who were fathered by Italian men a half century prior in the colonial period; then, the second man dies leaving no provision for his wife or his children with her. Secondly, *Kkeywa* makes evident the continuity of race-based hierarchies more than a quarter century after Ethiopia’s independence and the historical conclusion of Italian colonialism. The child protagonist’s fundamental human rights to food, shelter, education, and affiliation with her family are denied owing to her *meticcia* racial status. As Macoggi, educated as an attorney in Bologna outlines in her Introduction to *Kkeywa*, *meticcio* was a subaltern race invented by fascist law in the colonies in the 1930s to shore up the notion of the “pure” Italian race, thus, to justify Italy’s colonial adventure in Africa and construct the Italian nation itself. Yet, half a century later during the events of Macoggi’s *Kkeywa*, the material effects of the protagonist’s minoritized racial positionality persists as demonstrated by the child’s experiences with her Italian adoptive mother who procures her as personal property via a questionable transracial and transnational adoption by coercion. Subsequently, the woman exploits the child as unpaid labor for hours a day in her business activity. The fact that no investigation was ever conducted of the child protagonist’s adoption or forced immigration to Italy by either the Italian or Ethiopian

authorities verifies the persistent non-person status of a *meticcia* child in 1970s and 1980s Ethiopia and Italy.

Also included in the first chapter of this study is an analysis of another work by Carla Macoggi, *La nemesi della rossa* (2012). A sort of sequel to *Kkeywa*, the second text is narrated from the perspective of the now twenty-four-year-old protagonist, a graduate in Law from the University of Bologna as the author herself, who undertakes her own juridical investigation of the circumstances of her adoption and the abuses she suffered at the hands of her Italian adoptive mother. *La nemesi della rossa* is framed in this study as a fictionalized memoir in that the author confirmed in a journalistic interview that the text was her own personal story even though she changed the name of the protagonist to Fiorella as well as altered some of the circumstances of the events. Yet this analysis does not conceptualize *La nemesi della rossa* as a straightforward autobiography; instead, it is presented as a fictionalized memoir or a “semi-autobiography” as theorized by Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004). Wright holds that semi-autobiographical novels allow a Black female diaspora author to draw parallels between her own story and that of her protagonist to highlight universal social-political experiences with other minoritized women. In semi-autobiography, the singular becomes representative of the collective Other who is marginalized by sex, class, race, nationality, and/or a traumatic migratory experience, as is the case in Carla Macoggi’s protagonist. In point of fact, the author underscores the universality of Fiorella’s story in *La nemesi della rossa* beginning with the dedication which presents the protagonist as an *exemplum* of other children who are separated from their families of origin by war, poverty, or race-based immigration laws. These arguments are highly relevant yet today considering the United States’ current policy of separating Mexican children from their parents at the border, imprisoning them in inhumane detention centers, as well as Italy’s practice

of leaving (mostly black) refugee women and children offshore in boats for days and weeks, many of whom die before reaching shore, or sequestering them in CDA/”Centri di accoglienza” [“welcoming centers”], similar to jail cells, if they don’t have “legitimate” asylum requests.

Regarding theoretical framework, Kelly Oliver’s *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001) provides a perspective via which to analyze Macoggi’s semi-autobiographical novel or fictionalized memoir as a form of “witnessing,” a sort of trauma testimony via which subjectivity of the survivor can be constructed by narration. Oliver conceptualizes a bivalent notion of witnessing, juridical and psychoanalytic. In the juridical sense, the narrator testifies like an eyewitness and presents the verifiable historical facts as in a court trial. Consistent with juridical witnessing, Macoggi’s *La nemesi della rossa* is prefaced by a legal document and the plot itself reconstructs the “facts of her case,” the events in the protagonist’s childhood beginning at age ten when she arrived in Italy with her adoptive mother who then discards the child to a dizzying series of temporary guardians, even though the woman remains the parent-of-record in the Bologna Juvenile Court and collects state benefits as such. The story concludes when Fiorella is homeless, abandoned by her multiple Italian guardians, and is literally sleeping under a bridge when she has a psychotic breakdown. According to psychologists Baikie and Wilhelm, the juridical step in witnessing, or the reproduction of a factual account of an anguishing experience, is an efficacious act in healing from a trauma: composing a “coherent narrative” of distressing memories renders them less toxic and anxiety-inducing; in fact, Macoggi reveals in an interview that she composed her two novels in a period of “profound self-analysis” and that she had therapeutic intentions for her writing. Additionally, Oliver distinguishes the importance of the psychoanalytic component of witnessing which conveys the subjective reality of a story. As such, *La nemesi della rossa* is not merely an eyewitness testimony of Fiorella’s adoption, exploitation, and abandonment by an

Italian woman, instead, the narration is colored by “dolore dappertutto” [“pain everywhere”] with a lexicon heavy with psychoaffective connotations that reflect the suffering and lost childhood of the protagonist. Oliver clarifies that the psychoanalytic aspect of witnessing is dependent on the positionality of the subject and is expedient in constructing subjectivity that has been denied by hegemonic groups, as Macoggi’s protagonist is a Black, *meticcia*, impoverished, female immigrant child who has been deprived of her natural mother by a 1970s Italian colonizer. Moreover, Lacan’s mirror theory returns in this analysis of *La nemesi della rossa* to demonstrate how Fiorella, in the absence of her Black mother as the basis for establishing her subjectivity, adopts the pen as an alternate means to establish an intact ego. Fiorella even employs the metaphor of *specchio/scrittura* [“mirror/writing”] in the narration; in other words, the protagonist refers to her writings in the Lacanian sense as a metaphorical mirror which reflects the vicissitudes of a “hero” with the objective of creating an affirming identity for herself that has been negated and deformed by her interactions with her various Italian surrogate parents. Nevertheless, *La nemesi della rossa* concludes ambiguously with Fiorella’s homelessness and involuntary hospitalization for a dissociative psychotic crisis. Furthermore, the author herself, whose personal history mirrors closely that of the protagonist’s, committed suicide in her late forties. The unsettling, inconclusive termination of *La nemesi della rossa* indicates that therapeutic writing in the form of fictionalized memoir and exceptional educational accomplishments in the face of nearly insurmountable obstacles, the two remedies that the protagonist employs to remedy her own postcolonial pathology and create a coherent sense of self, are inadequate substitutes on which to ground self-worth and identity in the stead of one’s natural Black mother.

The second chapter of this project is dedicated to Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s novel, *Madre piccola* [“Little mother”] (2007). In this text, the *groviglio dei fili* [“the tangle of threads”] is the

recurrent metaphor that represents the vast, sustaining, interconnecting familial network of the three Somalian protagonists. The severed *groviglio* or broken kinship fabric also connotes the central problem of the narrative: the alienation of the family members who have been separated due to the sequelae of the half-century long Italian colonial role in Somalia (1905-1947): the perpetual state of anarchy and civil war in their homeland has resulted in the death, imprisonment, and/or the forced emigration of most family members and their dispersal in a plethora of countries from Italy to Germany, Finland, England, and the United States. *Madre piccola* takes place in the Third Millennium and is alternately recounted by three disconnected remaining members of the family, reproducing the *groviglio dei fili* in the formal structure of the narrative itself, two female cousins who grew up as sisters and the husband of one of them. Yet at the nucleus of the novel is a flashback to a specific historical moment that explains the origins of their predicament, and by extension that of other members of the Somalian diaspora dispersed all over the world, and which links their alienated condition to Italy's colonizing mission in Somalia in the first half of the twentieth century. The central chapter of the novel refers to the collapse of the Somalian state in late 1990. Siad Barre, the deposed military dictator, had been educated, positioned in power, and sustained by the former Italian colonizers. The fall of his two-decade regime (1969-1991) in Mogadishu by a military coup left a political void that continues to this day and resulted in a complex quagmire of anarchy, famine, economic and social destruction, and interminable civil war among a multitude of ideologically opposed factions battling for power. However, the Interlude dedicated to Somalia's history at the heart of *Madre piccola* is not intended nor presented as a history lesson;<sup>18</sup> instead, it constitutes a melancholic emotional and interpersonal history of

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<sup>18</sup> A brief history of Italy's colonization of Somalia as well as the sequential fallout which continues to this day in the form of social, political, and economic destruction and civil way the country is furnished in the second chapter of this study.

the deleterious effects of the dissolution of the Somalian state and its resultant protracted civil war on the three protagonists of Ali Farah's novel who represent the fractured *groviglio dei fili* of their family and, by extension, other members of the Somalian diaspora. What Alessandra Di Maio dubs "the collapse of the postcolonial model," the devastation of Somalia has its roots in its past as a former British, French, and Italian colony, and has resulted in more than two million Somalian refugees<sup>19</sup> worldwide who are scattered like "pearls in a broken necklace," just as the three protagonists of Ali Farah's novel. (Di Maio xv-xvii) As of today, Somalia is "little more than a geographical expression," in the words of the world's foremost scholar on Somalian culture and history, Ioan Lewis. (Ioan Lewis x)

This analysis will focus on one of the *fili* ["threads"] of the *groviglio*, Domenica/Axad, and will present her story as an inverted *Bildungsroman*, as the undoing of her identity due to a series of factors: a traumatic childhood migration experience from Somalia to Italy, her framing in the European context as a black alien, and her difficult rapport with her depressed mother. The daughter of an Italian woman and a Somalian man, Domenica/Axad grows up for the first ten years of her life in Mogadishu surrounded by a loving, united, extended family of her parents, her Somalian aunts, uncles, and cousins. The narrative follows Domenica/Axad's painful, two-decade prolonged period of "identity diffusion," as defined by Erik Erikson, in which she is unable to consolidate an affirming, coherent identity for herself as a Black Somalian-Italian woman living in Europe. Her fragile, split identity is revealed even by the uncertain binomial with which she and others refer to her, "Domenica/Axad," both being the equivalent of "Sunday," the Christian holy

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<sup>19</sup> Ioan Lewis, social anthropologist, studied first-hand Somalia's peoples and culture since the 1950s. In his *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society* (2008), he states that more than two million Somalian refugees are scattered throughout the world due to the collapse of their state, "in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and North America." (Ioan Lewis 1)



day, a problematic name given to her that conflicts with and denies her Somalian Muslim origins. The etiology of Domenica/Axad's identity diffusion begins when she experiences an abrupt break with her past when her mother decides, for reasons that are never explained in the novel, to relocate with her ten-year-old daughter to Italy. Domenica/Axad suffers the migration as a veritable trauma in which she loses overnight her father, her beloved family support network, including her cousin Barni who is like a sister to her, one of her mother tongues, and her country and culture of origin. Furthermore, upon her arrival in the new *patria*, her body is immediately inscribed as a black "African" foreigner notwithstanding her Italian mother and passport. Domenica/Axad's experience recalls that of Carla Macoggi's protagonist who is only peripherally aware of her *meticcia* racial status in the familial and cultural context in Ethiopia and who "becomes black" only when she is adopted/acquired by a white Italian and migrates to her adoptive mother's country. Analogous to Fiorella, Ali Farah's protagonist suffers her immigration to Italy as a redefinition of her very self and intrinsic worth when she becomes designated by the new context as "black" and "alien." Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) is utilized in the analysis of Domenica/Axad's experience to consider how her being *meticcia*, Ethiopian-Italian, and bilingual, her "complex, messy origins" in his terminology, are inexplicable as "Italian." Gilroy asserts that an "unacknowledged, haunting ghost of colonial past" is the prevailing ideology in Europe (and in the United States, one could claim) of who is "us" and "them" based on race. In his study, Gilroy dismantles the imaginary of race as fixed, essential, biologically- and culturally-based; thus, he exposes how race is necessarily bound to the binary of citizen/stranger in the modern nation-state and determines the power dynamic human/subhuman. (Gilroy *Postcolonial* 7-8) Domenica's newly acquired alienating blackness/foreignness in Italy dominates her affective state for the next two decades of her life as manifested by her debilitating depression, self-

mutilation, and suicidal ideation which begins in middle school and continues throughout young adulthood. José Esteban Muñoz's essay, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position" (2006), is employed to link "position with feeling" in Domenica/Axad's case. Muñoz argues that individuals who are "antinormative" for race, as is the case of Black/*meticcias* Domenica/Axad, thus, impossibly Italian, are perennially "cognizant of the way (they are) not and can never be white," therefore, race becomes a "depressive position" for the alien(ated) individual. (Muñoz 679-681, my insertion) After her immigration to Italy, Domenica/Axad perceives herself as "eccentrica e indefinita" ["eccentric and undefined"] and becomes dominated by "brown feelings," in the words of Muñoz. She describes her affective state as perennially "malinconica" ["malinconic"], "...non mi rimase un granché della luce che emanavo." ["...not much remained of the light I used to emanate."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 47, 49, 244-245) Domenica/Axad somaticizes her distress by carving away her own skin, the source of her alienation.

Further exacerbating Domenica's sense of estrangement and fragile identity is her mother's debilitating depression which is seemingly related to her own isolation, being separated from her husband who never comes to live with them in Rome. Domenica's mother's inability to reconcile herself to her failed marriage hinders her project to forge an independent life for herself and her daughter in Italy. The woman, who significantly remains unnamed throughout the novel, addresses her own pain and disappointment by utilizing her ten-year-old daughter as a confidant. The woman's fragility patently compromises her ability to parent Domenica/Axad and provide a strong female role model for her during a critical phase of development. Thus, the young protagonist becomes involuntarily positioned as an emotional and physical caregiver/therapist to her mother, assuming the role of a "parentified child" who is constrained to nurture her own parent. In reality,

this duty began in early childhood when Domenica/Axad served as her mother's translator in the Somalian familial environment, given that her mother never learned her husband's language and seemed to make little effort to do so, a role that rendered the little girl an "anxious" child, in her words. The pertinent literature in psychiatry and psychology on "child language brokering," as this practice is called when a child serves as an interpreter/translator for a parent, and its deleterious effects on child and adolescent development is put into conversation with Domenica/Axad's experience. Furthermore, the medical and psychological literature on "parentification" or "transgenerational boundary transgressions," as in the role reversal of the parent-child dynamic, is explanatory in Domenica/Axad's own depression, her cutting behavior, and renders even more problematic the young woman's consolidation of identity during adolescence in a difficult social-political ambient where she is framed as a racially-minoritized stranger.

As a preliminary solution to her alienation, Domenica/Axad assumes in early adolescence a "foreclosed identity,"<sup>20</sup> which is characterized by prematurely accepting a parental paradigm without the typical exploratory phase of possible identities which are more consonant with one's sense of self. In short, she remakes herself in the image of her mother, by performing, "miming" in her words, "white Italian Catholic woman" in her mode of dress, language, new religious Christian fervor, and her engagement to an Italian boy when she is in high school. Nonetheless, the mimed identity is an anguished one, incoherent with Domenica/Axad's reality as a Black Somalian-Italian diaspora young woman and, consequently, her depression and self-cutting behavior augment. After a painful betrayal by her mother when Domenica is twenty years old who sends her into a war zone in Somalia to check on the whereabouts of her husband, the young

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<sup>20</sup> The literature in the field of psychology related to identity statuses will be explained in the chapter on Ali Farah's novel. See Phillip Hammack's "Theoretical Foundations of Identity" in *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development* (2015).

woman suffers a breakdown. Subsequently, she decides to follow her Somalian cousin, Libeen, an undocumented “alien” in Europe, with whom she has an ambiguous, repressive romantic relationship. With her cousin, Domenica’s white Italian Catholic identity is cast off to assume another imposed one, that of “Black Somalian strictly observant Muslim woman refugee” who subjugates herself, this time, to the will of her man. Reflecting the negation of a possibility of “I,” that is, a consonant identity for herself, Domenica becomes hysterically mute, resumes cutting herself, and wanders for ten years as a refugee in Europe and the United States with no particular goals and oppressed in (another) unhealthy relationship which denies her very person, origins, and experiences.

Eventually, Domenica/Axad seeks remedy for her identity diffusion and her “depressive position,” per Muñoz, in Europe as a Black Somalian woman after her cousin, Libeen, betrays her. In her late twenties, free to explore other possible identities for herself other than the foreclosed, ready-made ones of “white Italian Catholic” or “Black Somalian Muslim refugee,” the protagonist pieces together a patchwork, *métissage* identity built on alternate female models which recall Michelle Wright’s archetype of the Black mother. Nearly all her *exempla* are, notably, Black Somalian diaspora women living in Europe. The protagonist adopts one woman’s model for love and sexuality which is less passive, more self-respecting, and celebratory of her “mixed race” body; she follows several other Somalian women’s example of motherhood, in contrast to that of her mother, which is self-sacrificing, responsible, constant, nurturing, and protective of children; and she adopts a male acquaintance’s paradigm for work in her study and training to become a videographer of the Somalian diaspora in the United States and Europe. However, the most meaningful heroine for Domenica/Axad is her cousin, Barni, her “sister” from whom she was separated in childhood and who is now an obstetrician in Rome, importantly, a woman who cares

for other women and their children. The two establish a mutually sustaining, affirming “sorellanza elettiva” [“elective sisterhood”], a sort of surrogate motherhood for Domenica, which permits the latter, who is pregnant with her first child, to finally consolidate an identity as a conscientious mother as well as a professional artist/filmmaker in her early thirties. Reflecting Michelle Wright’s Black mother model, Barni, the *habaryar* or “madre piccola” [“little mother”] as the title pays homage to her, shares with Domenica/Axad a family history, blood bonds, a painful diaspora experience from Somalia to Italy, and a social-political reality which inscribes them as Black aliens in Italy. Their mutual support results in the consolidation of the protagonist’s identity as reflected by the name she bestows on herself: Domenica Taariikh, which reflects both her Italian given name conferred on her by her mother, as well as her father’s given name as a surname, as is the tradition in Somalia. Thus, Domenica Taariikh reflects the affirming, coherent identity that she establishes for herself which denies neither her Italian nor her Somalian origins. As *habaryar*, little mothers for each other, Barni and Domenica reconstruct a new *groviglio dei fili* which sustains both themselves as well as little Taariikh who represents hope for the next generation of the Somalian diaspora in Italy.

Igiaba Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) is the final text presented in this study as an exemplar of an inverted *Bildungsroman* from Italian postcolonial literature. Scego’s novel, alternately recounted by five protagonists which consist of two mothers, their respective daughters, and the father of both young women, brings to the forefront the theme of “postcolonial pathology,” or politically and historically-engendered depression or other psychological disorders, a term adapted for the context of Italian postcolonial literature from Ann Cvetkovich’s “political depression” in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). In this analysis, postcolonial pathology will refer to the psycho-affective anguish suffered by three successive generations of a Somalian family which has

its genealogy in their encounter with specific historical moments related to Italian colonialism: Italy's colonization of Somalia (1905-1947); the decade after Italy's defeat in World War II when it was granted the so-called "Afis" or Administrative Trusteeship of Somalia by the United Nations (1950-1960); and the postcolonial period in Italy at the turn of the Third Millennium in which essentialist identities founded on the European colonial constructs of race, gender, and nationality, and consequently differential human rights, are deep-seated, naturalized, and continue to significantly impact the experiences of black Italians, even to the point of death. This study dialogues with the intellectual tradition of assigning the burden of psychiatric disorders to colonial and racial violence by Frantz Fanon in his chapter entitled "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Fanon, a medical doctor and psychiatrist, presents a series of psychiatric case studies of Algerians during French colonization which document a wide range of the "pathology that it (colonial violence, war, torture, dehumanization, famine) produces," including depression, homicidal impulses even in children, physical and psychological abuse of one's spouse and children, impotence, and a multitude of various psychoses. (Fanon *Wretched* 184, my insertion) Even though he was a physician, Fanon attributes the "mental disorders" of his patients not to biochemical or physiological etiologies but to the "bloody, pitiless atmosphere, (and) the generalization of inhuman practices," in short, to the French colonizers' barbarous treatment of the Algerians which was justified by a generally accepted European pseudoscience that systematically denied the "African's" humanity. (Fanon *Wretched* 225, 227)

Consistent with Fanon's paradigm of assigning the origins of psychological maladies to the colonial practices of oppression and dehumanization of the abject Other, Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* makes manifest multiple generations of psychopathology in the central protagonist's, Zuhra's, family owed to traumas they suffered under Italian colonialism and the subsequent "Afis"

decade. Verifiable psychiatric “diagnoses” in these individuals range from major depression to eating disorders to alcoholism to panic attacks to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to Rape Trauma Syndrome. All of these “disorders” trace their origins, at least in part, to a single heinous event recounted in the novel: the brutal, senseless public gang rape of a sixteen-year old Somalian boy, Majid, Zuhra’s paternal grandfather, by a band of Italian and German fascist soldiers during the colonial domination of Somalia and the merciless slaughter of his traveling companions. This calamity would continue to haunt Majid’s family two generations later, leading to multi-generational psychological scars on his entire family line. However, Scego’s narrative makes clear that the rape of adolescent civilians by fascist soldiers was not an isolated incident. As opposed to Carla Macoggi’s *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa* and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola* in which an overt discussion of History is confined to the Introduction to the text, remains in the background of the narrative, or is highlighted in a single central chapter, respectively, Igiaba Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia* brings History to the forefront: the story recounts numerous heinous incidents perpetrated by the Italians on the Somalian people during its colonial domination of them but also in the postcolonial period to include contemporary Italy, and presents them as causal in the devastating physical and psychological traumas on Zuhra’s grandparents, her parents, and the protagonist herself. Akin to Fanon’s double role of “politician-psychiatrist” in his exposition of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Igiaba Scego in her telling of *Oltre Babilonia* dons the triple hat of “politician-cultural critic-author:” as an artist, Scego adopts literature aesthetically, as an artistic medium. As a cultural-historical critic, Scego’s novel presents three generations of Zuhra’s family as an *exemplum* of Somalians’ experiences under Italian oppression; in what constitutes a Counter History, the narrative corrects the widespread amnesia of Italy’s colonial past or the revisionist history of the Italians as the *brava gente* [“good people/colonizers”], what is referred to as the

“triple silence” of the state, the Italian academy, and the public itself, by historian Antonio Morone in his *L’Ultima Colonia: Come l’Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960* (2011). Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia*, which can be (partially) framed as a Counter History, interweaves into the narrative precise names, dates, places, and atrocities committed by the Italians in Somalia during colonialism and thereafter. Thus, *Oltre Babilonia* provides a Counter History which represents an important contribution to decolonizing Italian history consistent with Walter Mignolo’s exhortation of the necessity to “decolonize...Western scholarship” by reconstructing knowledge from the subaltern perspective, relevant in Igiaba Scego’s case given that she is a Black Italian woman of Somalian refugee parents. (Mignolo 64, 70) Lastly, as a political instrument, the story of Zuhra, set in the early 2000s in Rome, exposes the link between colonialism and the persistent hierarchical positionalities in contemporary Italy of race, gender, and nationality which result in innumerable descriptions of racism as well as the rape of an eight-year old Black Somalian girl in a Catholic boarding school.

Zuhra, a thirty-year old Black Italian woman with Somalian parents, is the central protagonist of *Oltre Babilonia*. Her story is privileged in that she is the only protagonist who speaks in the first person and her narratives form the cornice of the novel comprising the Prologue and Epilogue to the novel. Moreover, Zuhra’s story presents the central problem to be resolved in the novel: the resolution of her depression, the “loss of her colors” as she perceives it, and her disturbed identity formation as a sexually mature woman which impedes her from close physical and emotional rapports. Zuhra’s narrative can be read as an inverted *Bildungsroman* or the narration of the disturbance of her identity formation which can be attributed in great part to the trauma of being raped for five years as a child. Yet Zuhra’s sense of self is also subjected to daily, more insidious assaults on her notion of self given her uninterpretable identity as a Black Italian in an



environment/*polis* of “ethnically absolute and culturalist racism” as described by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). In his study, Gilroy addresses the notion of ethnic and cultural absolutism, yet today a prevalent discourse of the political right in Europe and the United States, and dismantles the Western European nation which is “construct(ed) as an ethnically homogeneous object” which allows the marginalization and dehumanization of racialized Others. (Gilroy *Black* 3, 10) Concomitant with her abject positionality, Zuhra’s identity construction is disturbed by the haunting ghosts of Italy’s colonial history which have traumatized several generations of Zuhra’s family, resulting in her parents being orphaned and, in her case, depriving her of a father during her formative years and resulting in her mother’s alcoholism and depression. Zuhra’s suffered identity, a vivid example of postcolonial pathology, manifests corporally in her depression, panic attacks, an eating disorder, and the denial of her sexuality.

For Zuhra, storytelling plays a fundamental role in healing from the trauma of being raped and is also essential in the complex construction of a coherent, affirmative identity as an Italian Black woman with complex linguistic, ethnic, and cultural origins. The storytelling takes a multitude of forms: first, on the advice of her psychotherapist, Zuhra records her rape narrative in the form of a *romanzo*/novel which reflects the “expressive writing” protocol that has been recognized as an efficacious therapy since the 1980s for trauma victims. According to psychologists Pennebaker and Chung (2011) who reviewed twenty years of the literature on expressive writing, recording the details of a traumatic experience, such as childhood sexual abuse in Zuhra’s case, allows the survivor to pass from an “emotional-processing” of the trauma, which produces continual distress and rumination about it, to a “cognitive/linguistic processing:” by translating the agonizing event(s) into words/language, the individual “assigns meaning, coherence, and structure” to the trauma, subtracting its affective content, thus, reducing its detrimental effects on the psyche.

(Pennebaker and Chung 426-433) In fact, after the completion of her trauma narrative at the conclusion of *Oltre Babilonia*, Zuhra tethers her newfound mental health to her body, specifically, her vagina describing it as “felice and innamorata” [“happy and in love”]. (Scego *Oltre* 449) Her vagina, the anatomical part of her that had been violated for years as a child, is now an essential component of Zuhra’s reconciliation with her body and her prior suppressed sexuality, and an important element of resolving her identity as a mature woman free to love both corporally and psychologically.

Yet, this analysis does not present *Oltre Babilonia* as simply a rape narrative. It is principally read as an “identity narrative” as theorized by Jerome Bruner in his “Self-Making and World-Making” (1986) in which he contends that identity is constructed through the stories that we tell about ourselves, to ourselves. Bruner claims that one’s construction of self is rhetorical: by selecting among a multiplicity of life events the worthwhile or representative episodes that one relates in a life story, the author/individual demonstrates his/her “commitment to a certain set of presuppositions about oneself, one’s relation to others, one’s view of the world and one’s place in it;” thereby, we create self via the construction of the narrative itself, by selecting what is worth telling about ourselves and our experiences, what Bruner refers to as “significant episodes.” (Bruner 35) In Zuhra’s case, her story in *Oltre Babilonia* recounts not only a rape trauma narrative as a “significant episode,” but returns frequently to her distant relationship with her beloved mother who has somaticized the pain of her own diaspora experience in Italy with alcoholism and depression. Another salient theme in Zuhra’s life narrative is growing up without a father who abandoned her and her mother, as his father before him. Another *topos* in Zuhra’s life story is the insidious and violent forms of racism that she encounters daily as a Black woman in Italy which confounds her ability to establish a coherent sense of self.

Zuhra's mother's own life narrative, another form of storytelling in *Oltre Babilonia*, is essential to Zuhra's healing. Maryam records her own story on audiocassettes, not for herself but to fill in Zuhra's void of family history. Moreover, Maryam desires to present a pre-alcoholic, pre-depressed, a "better version" of herself as she calls it, as a model for her young daughter, as well as her tender love story with Zuhra's father. Through her recorded life narrative, Maryam provides an alternative, richer, edifying portrait to Zuhra of her parents, parents she has known only as depressed, alcoholic, or absent, as well as the missing family history which is fundamental for the creation of Zuhra's life story, and by extension, herself. Returning to Michelle Wright's archetype of the Black mother as a critical reference point for identity construction in the Black female Other, Zuhra's Black Somalian mother, although imperfect, shares blood bonds, family history, and similar positionality with her daughter, allowing the two of them to reciprocally and dialogically create an affirming sense of self. Their strengthened subjectivity is demonstrated by her Maryam's resolve to stop drinking and prioritize her relationship with her daughter, and Zuhra's strength in, notwithstanding the unspeakable traumas that were inflicted on her body as a small child, no longer defining herself as a rape victim and opening herself to the possibility of love, resolving the conflict presented in the Prologue.

#### IV. CONCLUSION:

This reading of selected works of Italian postcolonial literature by Carla Macoggi, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego will be of narratives of multiple and transgenerational accounts of "postcolonial pathology" in late adolescents and young adults who are tackling the critical stage of identity formation. The protagonists' irresolution of identity crisis and, in many cases, resultant mental illness are directly attributable to the nexus between the personal/private/affective spheres and the public/political/historical realms as posited by Ann

Cvetkovich in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). Cvetkovich proposes a genealogy of “feeling bad” which she distances from the prevalent medical-physiological conceptualization of depression, suggesting, instead, social, cultural, and political geneses of debilitating sadness. Cvetkovich submits that states of melancholy and despair can be attributed to political experiences which frequently follow the color line, that is “histories of colonialism, genocide...legal exclusion and everyday segregation and isolation”, as well as experiences of “migration, diaspora, dislocation and dispossession” comport psycho-affective dysphoria. (Cvetkovich 130, 136) This analysis will consider Macoggi’s, Ali Farah’s, and Scego’s narratives as testimonies of the continuing physical and psychological traumas inflicted on youth who are dehumanized, “epidermalized” to use Frantz Fanon’s term and “erased” to use Michelle Wright’s verification of the obliteration of the Black female in racial counter-discourses, by their inscription as racial, outside-the-nation, female Other in Italy. Moreover, this study will explore the “materialist” effects of race, gender, and nationality on the deconstruction of the protagonists’ very identities, which culminates in politically-induced psychopathology in all cases. These stories, out of place in time and history by decades, if not centuries, demonstrate irrefutably that the fabricated image of the racialized, gendered, outside-the-nation Other continued/s to persist long after the official conclusion of European colonialism and results in significant psychopathology in individuals subjected to these invented binaries.

The protagonists who are (at least partially) successful in navigating the adolescent identity crisis in a *polis*/social-political context where they are marginalized by race, nationality, and gender adopt various remedies: in the case of Macoggi’s and Ali Farah’s protagonists, they attempt to validate a sense of self via intellectual pursuits, academic achievement, and meaningful work, respectively, which appear partially efficacious in both instances. Scego’s and Ali Farah’s

protagonists, instead, recuperate lost family history and repair or establish new familial relationships. Moreover, they “take inventory” of their genealogical and historical-political past which allows them to creolize/hybridize the multiple aspects of their identity and create an edifying, original, complex one. (Anzaldua 104-105) Recalling Michelle Wright’s archetype of the Black mother as a figure of “intersubjectivity” who provides a point of reference on which to found positive identities of blackness, femaleness, and complex ethnic and national origins in a hostile Italian environment, the solutions or lack thereof diverge in the various texts. (Wright 178) In the case of Macoggi’s protagonist, the deprivation of her Black Ethiopian mother leaves an indelible scar which is never healed by the satisfaction of years of intense study, nor is the act of creating an alternate identity as a “hero” in a fictionalized memoir efficacious as demonstrated by the ambiguous conclusion with the hospitalization of the protagonist for a psychotic breakdown. Regarding Ali Farah’s protagonist, in the absence of a Black mother or father and the depression of her white Italian mother, Domenica acquires a proxy Black parent in her cousin and life-long best friend with whom she founds *ex novo* a provisional family in which to raise her own Black Somalian-Italian child. Lastly, as an adult, Scego’s character recuperates her relationship with her Black, Somalian mother who has suffered from alcoholism and depression after her traumatic migratory experience to Italy. In all three cases with varying success, Macoggi’s, Ali Farah’s, and Scego’s protagonists adopt the pen to compose a life narrative which allows them to reject outright the distorted racial mirror of the white gaze and reflect to themselves, instead, a whole, race-, gender-, and nationality-neutral reflection of full personhood.

## **“In the Stead of the (Black Ethiopian) Mother: Witnessing to Construct Subjectivity in Carla Macoggi’s Autobiographical Tales”<sup>21</sup>**

“Chi, senza amore, si mette al posto della madre vera è come si mettesse al posto di Dio.” Alda Merini<sup>22</sup>

“L’assenza della madre non si può colmare.” Carla Macoggi<sup>23</sup>

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Carla Macoggi (1965 Addis Abeba–2013 Bologna) was an Italian-Ethiopian novelist and poet, and a University of Bologna-educated attorney. Her literary production consists of numerous short stories, several unpublished volumes of poetry, two blogs, and two novel-length works<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Racconto autobiografico” [“autobiographical tale”] is the term with which Macoggi’s protagonist refers to her story which constitutes the second work, *La nemesi della rossa* (2012). (Macoggi *Nemesi* 15) However, the author clearly posits this text as a continuation of her first work, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011): specifically, the first phrase of *Nemesi* refers explicitly to the conclusion of *Kkeywa* and the second chapter of *Nemesi* recapitulates the events in the first novel yet told from the point-of-view of the protagonist who is now an adult. The author confirmed in an undated radio interview that both *Kkeywa* and *Nemesi* are her personal stories and classified them as her “memoirs.” (Macoggi, Radio interview, n.d. [www.lestradedibabele.it](http://www.lestradedibabele.it))

<sup>22</sup> [“Whosoever, without love, puts him/herself in the place of the true mother, it is as if s/he puts himself in the place of God.”] All translations in this study, unless otherwise noted, are my own. Quote from Paolo Mengozzi’s prologue to Macoggi’s *La via per il paradiso*, 2004, one of the previous published versions of *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica*, 2011. The same phrase is repeated on p. 67 of *Kkeywa*.

<sup>23</sup> [“One can never fill the absence of one’s mother.”] (Radio interview with Carla Macoggi, *Le strade di Babele: Trasmissione di resistenza culturale di radio onda d’urto*. n.d.)

<sup>24</sup> For a bibliography of Macoggi’s published works, see the Works Cited section. A recurrent theme in several of Macoggi’s texts is that of a *meticcica* [“mixed race”] Ethiopian-Italian child who is taken from her mother and later abandoned in Italy by an Italian woman, including: the two fictionalized memoirs analyzed in this study, the previous versions of these texts (see footnote #22), and the two short stories “Come uno sciocco mulino a vento” (2009), a precursor to her novel *La nemesi della rossa*, and “Luna” (2009). In the latter, a fetus tells of her three births: the first from her mother’s womb, the second thirteen years later when she departed for Italy along with her mother, in a “utero di metallo” [“metallic uterus”] where her rebirth consisted of having to reconfigure her identity to the requirements of a new language, habits and customs. (Macoggi “Luna” 171) The third birth is marked when the child is deserted in Italy without her mother. Reference is made to a figure similar to her adoptive Italian mother, Romana, who is pre-eminent in *Kkeywa* and in *Nemesi*: “la donna traghettatrice che aveva presenziato alla sua terza nascita disse a Luna che essere rimpatriati significa stare entro i confini d’Italia, ma senza di lei, che aveva altri impegni improrogabili, altre partenze da gestire [...] (di conseguenza) Luna si rifugiò in se stessa, niente più forza di gravità, leggerezza senza radici per volteggiare nello spazio siderale. Luna era bambina, profuga, sola.” [“The ferrywoman who had taken part in her third birth said to Luna that ‘to be repatriated’ meant to stay within the borders of Italy, but without her, that she had other commitments that couldn’t be delayed, other departures to organize [...] (consequently) Luna withdrew into herself, (there was) no more force of gravity, (only) a rootless levity to spin

which are framed in this study as “autofiction,”<sup>25</sup> that is, as fictionalized memoir. Both of the novels, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* [“*The Red: The Story of a Mixed-Race Girl*”] (2011) and *La nemesi della rossa* [“*The Nemesis of the Red*”] (2012), had previous, published drafts,<sup>26</sup> one of which won a national literary contest for patients who adopt the pen to recover from mental

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around in boundless, astronomical space. Luna was a little girl, refugee, alone.”) (Macoggi “Luna” 174) Although the short story is narrated in third person, unlike Macoggi’s novel-length works *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa* which are recounted in first person, almost unconsciously the narrator in “Luna” reverts to first person in a single paragraph: “L’Italia è un paese meraviglioso che mi ha rimpatriato a mia insaputa dove non sono nata [...] dandomi un’identità a me sconosciuta, profuga, una terza nascita, senza cerimonie.” (“Italy is a marvelous country that repatriated me, unbeknownst to me, where I wasn’t born [...] giving me a new identity which was unknown to me, a refugee, a third birth, unceremoniously.”) (Macoggi “Luna” 174) “Luna” concludes ambiguously, just as *Kkeywa* and *Nemesi*, with an isolated child protagonist who finds herself surrounded by “indifferent” individuals who have no interest in caring for her. In regards to Macoggi’s other published literary works, another short story, “A Tahaitu piaceva il Fələwehəha” (2010), provides a brief political counter history of Ethiopia and another, “Quando Simcity diventa realtà: L’Hotel House” (2011), is an ironic commentary on race- and nationality-based stereotypes in Italy. Some of Carla Macoggi’s early texts were published under the pseudonym of Carla Amete Ghebriel Di Liberio the significance of which is explained in footnote #22 of this chapter. Lastly, the existence of her unpublished poetry notebooks was confirmed by an interview that I conducted of her long-term companion and friend, Fabrizio Fantini, in July 2017 in Bologna. Regarding the critical analyses of Macoggi’s works, very little has been conducted perhaps due to the author’s early demise and her relatively brief period of literary production. A special edition of *Scritture migranti* (volume 7, 2013) was dedicated to Macoggi’s two book-length texts after her death which puts into print for the first time a few of her previously unpublished works, including a short story, a conference speech (see footnote #22), and several blog entries; it also includes a critical essay by Teresa Solis: “Per non ‘esistere nel rivolo dell’inconsistenza del vuoto di chi tace parlando’.” In addition, Giulia De Gaudi published an online article reviewing one of Macoggi’s novels (2013), Eleonora Pili included Macoggi in her essay on Italian-Ethiopian women writers of Italian postcolonial literature (2014), and Caterina Romeo makes a brief nod to Macoggi in *Riscrivere la nazione*. (p. 29 note, 2018) Other brief texts by Macoggi can be found on her two blogs: the first blog, entitled “I Try to Be (a Blogger...),” contains entries from November 2010 to August 2, 2011 when the author announced the publication of her book *Kkeywa*; it can still be accessed at [cmacoggi.blogspot.fr/p/enea.html](http://cmacoggi.blogspot.fr/p/enea.html). She maintained the second blog, “Carla Macoggi: Le mie imp/depression,” from March 2011 until June 2013 shortly before her death which can be found at [carlamacoggi.wordpress.com/](http://carlamacoggi.wordpress.com/).

<sup>25</sup> The term “autofinzione” [“autofiction”] is adopted from Fulvio Pezzarossa who wrote “Il colore del memoir” [“The color of memoir”], a critical introduction to Macoggi’s second work. (Pezzarossa 9) The notion of fictionalized memoir is explored in this chapter under the section on Literary Genre.

<sup>26</sup> Carla Macoggi’s literary production began with *La via per il paradiso* [“*The road to paradise*”] (2004) written under the pen name of Carla Amete Ghebriel di Liberio meaning “Carla, free slave of Gabriel” in ge’ez, the liturgical language of Ethiopia. The work is very similar to *Kkeywa: La storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011), a significant difference being that the protagonist is named Carla in the first work but changed to Fiorella in the latter. The significance of this choice is discussed later in this chapter. Her second novel *La nemesi della rossa* (2012) evokes many similar themes and content of one of her preceding short stories, “Come uno sciocco mulino a vento” [“Like a foolish windmill in the wind”] (2009), published under the pseudonym of Carla M. for which she won a national literary contest for those who employ writing as a recovery tool for mental illness.

illness. This study focuses on Macoggi's sequential, semi-autobiographical novels which are considered, to employ Macoggi's terminology, an organic *racconto autobiografico* ["autobiographical tale"]. Just as the protagonist of the chronologically ordered narratives which are considered in this essay, Carla Macoggi was the daughter of an Ethiopian mother and an Italian father. She spent the first ten years of her life in Addis Abeba and the remainder of her childhood and adulthood in Italy, chiefly in Bologna, until her death by her own hand<sup>27</sup> at age forty-eight. Her two autobiographic tales narrate the disturbing account of Fiorella, a *meticcias* ["mixed race"] Ethiopian-Italian child, who is adopted by coercion and deception, then exploited as unpaid child labor by her adoptive Italian mother, only to be later abandoned. The first work, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcias*, is recounted from the point of view of Fiorella as a nine-year old child: it recapitulates in first person the protagonist's childhood in 1970s Ethiopia from birth until age nine when she is adopted by her mother's employer, an Italian woman who owns a hotel in Addis Abeba, who then forcibly removes the child from her homeland and blood relatives and departs with her definitively for Italy. This study frames Macoggi's first text as an inverted *Bildungsroman*: as opposed to the canonical *romanzo di formazione* ["coming of age novel"]

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<sup>27</sup> A reference to the fact that Carla Macoggi committed suicide is found in a footnote by Teresa Solis to her collection of previously unpublished works by the author, "Nulla di quel che è scritto parla di me". Per ricordare Carla Macoggi: Carla Macoggi, Inediti" (2013). In the article, Solis transcribes two of the last blog entries of Macoggi (carlamacoggi.wordpress.com, April 28 and 30, 2013) which appeared two months before her death. The posts, "Un uomo di potere e una donna...succube" ("A man of power and a woman...dominated (by him)") and "Un uomo di potere" ("A man of power"), describe a destructive relationship between a female student and her professor who "abuses his power" and, with his "intelligence and cynicism", plays on her vulnerabilities and "destroys" her. It is relevant to note that in the first of these two entries Macoggi adopts the same metaphor of a deep wound with which she refers to her migratory experience in the introduction to *Kkeywa*: "le sue profonde ferite di lunga durata" ["her long-lasting, deep wounds"]. It appears that the student (Macoggi?) was desperately seeking a friend and revealed her painful past to the professor who in the end exploited this intimacy, offering his "friendship" to her which was revealed to be "duplicità fasulle" ["phony duplicity"]. The entry remarks that he "didn't respect the rules", nor did he "respect her," and she "didn't want to exist" anymore. The next post, dated May 25, 2013, display a photo of a chapel in Sweden and Macoggi states that she wishes her ashes to be deposited in the garden of the church. Two more entries follow (June 1, 2013 and June 7, 2013), one a reflection on "gravity" with an accompanying song and the other an advice to not "lavorare in nero" ["work illegally/ clandestinely"], a common practice for immigrants due to the difficult unemployment situation in Italy. These are the last entries before her suicide.



which recounts the formative experiences and individuals during childhood that are essential in constructing one's identity, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* relates the deconstruction and deformation of a child's sense of self, from a much loved daughter of her natural Ethiopian mother and Italian father to the silenced, exploited, essentially black slave of her adoptive Italian mother. The subsequent text, *La nemesi della rossa*, consists of Macoggi's fictionalized memoir in the form of a protracted flashback narrated from the perspective of adult Fiorella; this work reconstructs her inexplicable life events from age ten to twenty-four via an elaboration of the painful memories of the traumatic loss of her natural mother, the abuses suffered at the hands of her various Italian surrogate parents, and the lingering consequences of her agonizing involuntary immigration to Italy. Consistent with Macoggi's preparation in jurisprudence, the second work makes reference to the protagonist's investigation of the legal documents related to her adoption and various foster care placements. These tales recount how a wealthy Italian businesswoman, whose hegemonic position as conferred by her race, nationality, and class, permits her to acquire a mixed-race, Ethiopian child as property to be exploited and discarded with little to no scrutiny by either Ethiopian or Italian officials. This study will demonstrate that the mother-daughter rapport between the woman and Fiorella in Macoggi's autofiction is governed by persistent Manichean dichotomies of colonizer/colonized, European master/African slave which allow the woman to neglect her adopted child's most basic needs for food, housing, and affiliation without consequence, thereby demonstrating that the fabricated image of the racialized abject Other continued/s long after the denouement of Italy's colonial adventures in Africa.

In point of fact, Macoggi's disturbing autobiographical narratives would have been worthy to make international crime headlines for child abduction, exploitation, and abandonment if only she had been born white and European. As the author declares in the 2009 Introduction to the first text,

one of the primary objectives of her two sequential memoirs is making evident the fate of *meticci*<sup>28</sup> [“mixed race” individuals] children like herself. In the Introduction to *Kkeywa*, Macoggi furnishes an *excursus* of the various laws beginning in 1933 which codified the precarious juridical status of the *meticcio* child which were then followed by successively more stringent legislation. For example, Law 19.4 in 1937 rendered illegal the rapports between white Italian men and black African women in the colonies, constituting a “crime” which was punishable by imprisonment. Thus, their offspring were illegitimate according to the state. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 13-15)

Nonetheless, multitudes of *meticci* children resulted from (often involuntary) sexual encounters between colonizer and colonized, or from temporary marital relationships between Italian men in the colonies and their African “wives,” the so-called *madamoto* or *more uxorio* [“common law couple”] arrangement. These children, including those born long after the fall of fascism, as in the case of Macoggi herself, were denied identity, affiliation, and Italian citizenship status even though they had an Italian parent and, therefore, according to *ius sanguinis* [“blood law”], had the right to automatic citizenship. Instead, these undesirable progeny, likened to an “infection” of the Italian race by the Law 1.6 of 1936, belonged to a new race invented by the law and by nationalist propaganda. In the words of Macoggi, the children of Italian fathers in the colonies constituted a “casta di meticci...quali esseri anormali” [“a cast of half-breeds...as abnormal beings”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 15) While the legislation acknowledged with circumspection that this new race of beings was human (yet not Italian), Macoggi notes with irony that, nonetheless, the *meticcio* was a

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<sup>28</sup> For an overview of the historical practice and the legislation which disciplined *madamoto* relationships between Italian colonizers and indigenous women as well as the legal status of their offspring, see Gianluca Gabrielli, “Un aspetto della politica razzista nell’impero: Il problema dei meticci” in *Passato e presente: Rivista di storia contemporanea* (1997). Even though Gabrielli’s essay is intended for a scholarly audience of historians, his study is relevant in the context of Macoggi’s two novels to document how race, in particular the *meticcio*, was indisputably fabricated during this period and, as the experiences of Macoggi’s protagonist demonstrate, how these same conceptualizations of race and racial hierarchies are persistent yet today.

(sub)species of humanity, one who shouldn't be “confondersi con la persona che raccoglieva il beneficio della nostra umanità” [“confused with a person who reaped the benefit of our own humanity”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 15)

Literary scholar Fulvio Pezzarossa aptly notes in his introduction to Macoggi's second work, *La nemesi della rossa*, that the narrative events are situated in a significant time period, in the 1960s and 1970s, twenty years after the fall of fascism and several decades before the initial wave of immigration from Africa to Italy. Pezzarossa highlights the importance of the historic era of the novels: the inhumane treatment and even crimes committed against the child protagonist of the two novels lay bare “un'inconfessata linea del colore” [“an unconfessed color line”] in 1970s Italy, a longstanding and deeply-rooted “ostilità razziale” [“racial hostility”]. (Pezzarossa 7, 10) Since Macoggi's stories are collocated in a time span long distant from Mussolini and well before the current “immigrant crisis” in Italy, two diffuse, contemporary myths are summarily dismissed by her narratives: one, that subjugation/dehumanization of the racialized Other ceased at the conclusion of Italy's relatively brief colonial foray in Africa, and, secondly, that the current-day reluctance to welcome (especially black) immigrants to the Italian peninsula is not entirely and satisfactorily explained by the widely disseminated rhetoric of the social and economic challenges of dealing with the “invasion” of large numbers of asylum seekers and economic migrants. Widespread diffidence (at best) and, frequently, hostility and violence demonstrated toward the Other *di colore* [“colored”] in Italy is owed in great part to chronic and deeply-seated racism. This analysis will demonstrate that Macoggi's “autobiographic stories” expose longstanding and entrenched racial enmity in 1970s and 1980s Italy based on the artificial, yet persistent, constructs of race, gender, and nationality, a political and social milieu which continues yet today.

Regarding theoretical approach, the two novels will be considered as a unified whole which constitute an acrimonious *j'accuse* against those who exploited a vulnerable “bimba meticcica” [“mulatto girl”], the protagonist of both novels and, loosely, the author herself. Macoggi adopts the autobiographical novel as an instrument of “response-ability” in the words of philosopher Kelly Oliver (Oliver 7), that is, as a device which allows her to confer a voice to herself, a voice which was denied to her for two decades by her adoptive mother and other Italian surrogate parents: “lunghe anni di silenzio. Silenzio imposto” [“long years of silence. Forced silence”]. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 18) With the written word, Macoggi imbues herself with the authority to address those who treated her as subhuman, as property to be exploited at will and then abandoned. Even so, the author employs writing in a constructive sense as well, as a means via which she attempts to create an affirming identity for herself: first, by the simple historical reconstruction of her life’s events-- “per fare ordine nel caos della vita. Della mia vita.” [“to put the chaos of life in order. Of my life.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 16), the same objective being echoed in the second text, “volendo ricomporre la mia vita così come si ricongiungono parti di un puzzle” [“wishing to put my life back together like one rejoins the pieces of a puzzle”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 18). Her hope is that the act of reassembling and reordering the pieces of her childhood will permit her to “voltare pagina... salvarmi” [“to move on...to save myself”]. (Macoggi Introduction *Kkeywa* 20-21)

Macoggi’s works will be considered as a form of “witnessing” in the bivalent sense of the term as proposed by Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001). Oliver distinguishes between the juridical connotation of witnessing which implies an eyewitness account, that is, one that relates the objective, verifiable facts of a story, and the religious/psychoanalytic implications of testimony, which she designates as “bearing witness.” (Oliver 16) In the latter sense, the storyteller recounts what cannot be seen, in other words, she relives her own traumatic experiences

which are significantly colored by the context of her particular historical and social circumstances. According to Oliver, the act itself of witnessing confers the agencies of “address-ability and response-ability” to the survivor, allowing her to fashion for herself the subjectivity which has been denied to her. (Oliver 17) Adopting Oliver’s theory on witnessing, Macoggi’s memoirs will be considered as both an historical, eyewitness document which serves to refute the deceptions related to her adoption and forced immigration, as well as record the reprehensible crimes that her various Italian guardians committed against her as a defenseless child. Yet her semi-autobiographical stories also give flesh and expression to the psycho-affective component of her experiences as a mixed-race girl in postcolonial Ethiopia and Nineteen Seventies and Eighties Italy, a lost childhood consisting of “anni...pieni di dolore. Malinconia e tristezza.” [“years [...] filled with pain. Melancholy and sadness.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 15)

## II. THE HISTORICAL CONTINUITY OF COLONIAL *MADAMATO* MARRIAGES IN 1970s ETHIOPIA AND ITALY

In *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011) and *La nemesi della rossa* (2012), the child protagonist, Fiorella, is the fruit of a brief encounter between a seventeen-year old Ethiopian girl, Selamawit, and an unnamed Italian military officer, a “*seduttore*” [“seducer”/“charmer”] as he is referred to years later by the grown daughter given that he never recognized her as his child nor provided financial support to her or her mother. Fiorella’s parents meet in the late 1960s in a hotel in Addis Abeba where her adolescent mother works as a chambermaid: the child’s father impregnates the teenager and disappears from the narration. Shortly thereafter, most likely to guarantee the survival of her infant, Fiorella’s young mother becomes the *madama*, a temporary “comfort wife,” of an elderly, renegade Italian officer who has chosen to remain in Addis Abeba instead of returning to his homeland. Like Fiorella’s biological father, the adoptive father has a legitimate wife and family in Italy as well, thus, Selamawit’s status in the *madamismo* “marriage”

is betwixt a prostitute and a common-law wife. Ruth Iyob describes *madamismo*, the practice of common law marriage between an Italian man and a colonized African woman, as a colonial modification of “existing customs of concubinage, or contractual conjugal arrangements, which coexisted with formally sanctioned long-term marriages.” (Iyob 236) She notes that, in the colonies, the *madama* “occupied a higher position and enjoyed more income than the prostitute,” yet she did not receive legal recognition by the Italian State in terms of property and inheritance rights, nor were her children necessarily recognized by their fathers. (Iyob 236) Even though Selamawit and the second Italian colonel were unofficially wed in the 1970s, her precarious social and financial position is identical to that of the temporary marriages between indigenous women and Italian soldiers during the colonial period in Africa. Historian Gianluca Gabrielli traces the origins of the *madamato* rapports between colonizer and colonized in the Italian colonies to the long-standing practice of temporary *dumoz* marriages [“payment for services rendered”] which were diffuse among the Coptic populations in the Horn of Africa. (Gabrielli 78) Ruth Iyob clarifies that, prior to European colonialism in Africa, these contracts were essentially a form of institutionalized concubinage and involved some type of payment, often in the form of grains, cattle, or money, in exchange for the services of a temporary wife who provided the “comforts of home,” however, she notes that the arrangement could be severed freely by either party. (Iyob 236) Gabrielli clarifies that, in comparison to the *dumoz* marriage, the *madamato* relationship was more disparate in terms of the power differential between the “husband” and his “temporary wife” due to the racial and nationality-based hierarchies that operated between the white, European colonizer male and his black, indigenous woman. In fact, like the mother of Macoggi’s protagonist, the “woman” was frequently a child-adolescent and, as Iyob notes, many did not enter voluntarily into *madamato* marriages: often, they were compelled to do so after being raped by a colonist or after

being “donated” to one as a form of war booty. Unlike the concubinage agreement with a compatriot, a *madama* was not free to leave the relationship with an Italian man. If she chose to do so, her alternatives were to enter an institutionalized bordello or remain shamed and marginalized in the community. Furthermore, Gabrielli notes that the socioeconomic status of the colonizer himself was determinate in establishing the terms of the agreement: military personnel and lower-class workers tended to frequent prostitutes instead of assuming the financial and emotional responsibility of a rented wife, a practice called *sciarmuttismo*. Instead, military officers or higher-ranking officials contracted more formal, family-like arrangements, the *madamato*, as was the case for Selamawit, which were nonetheless precarious for the colonized wife and children in that they typically ceased abruptly when the colonizer returned to his homeland and, often, to his legally and politically recognized family there. (Gabrielli 78) As was the case with Fiorella, Macoggi’s protagonist (keeping in mind the significance of the historical moment of Macoggi’s semi-autobiographical stories which took place in the 1960s and 1970s, decades after Italy ceased to occupy Ethiopia in 1941), thousands of *meticci* children were abandoned by their Italian fathers. (Gabrielli 79, 81)

In addition, Gabrielli examines the evolution of the legislation, both prior and during the fascist period, which governed these provisory marriages and the citizenship and social-political status of the offspring born of them, laws which reflected the prevailing political ideology as well as the essential nature of racially-based hierarchies necessary to construct Italy as a unified nation. Briefly, in the late 1800s, *madamismo* was an accepted practice and the children born to these marriages were summarily granted citizenship and all concomitant rights, as long as they were recognized by their Italian father. The European state even encouraged the formation of these temporary families since they created advantageous political and social bonds between the

colonizers and the colonized peoples. For instance, Ruth Iyob verifies that partially nude photographs of native women were made into postcard advertisements and distributed in Italy to encourage the arrival of new colonizers. (Iyob 237) Moreover, before Fascism, *meticci* “mixed breed” children were considered genetically privileged and the possible progenitors of a “new race” which conferred advantageous physical and moral traits. (Gabrielli 80) Furthermore, prior to Mussolini’s drastic change in political position towards *madamato* marriages, a *meticcio* child was guaranteed Italian citizenship based on his/her “anthropological characteristics” by Article 8 even without recognition by an official, legal Italian parent; for example, the 1909 Codice Civile for the Colony of Eritrea granted Italian citizenship if the child appeared to have “Italian blood.” (Gabrielli 79) Additionally, in the 1920s, Catholic missionaries established orphanages and schools in the colonies to provide for and educate the *meticci* and even lobbied the state to finance them. (Gabrielli 84) Thus, prior to Italian fascism, common-law marriages between women in the colonies and Italian men were encouraged and the offspring of these relationships were guaranteed a modicum of legal and political status and safeguarded to some extent by institutions such as the church and the state.

However, Gabrielli highlights the decisive changes in the politics and legislation toward *sciarmuttismo*, *madamato* marriages, and *meticci* sons and daughters which were enacted under the fascist regime. The turning point was Mussolini’s May 1, 1936 law r.d.l. 1019, *Ordinamento e amministrazione dell’Africa Orientale Italiana* [“The Organization and Administration of Italian Eastern Africa”]. This legislation which was motivated by “mixofobia” as Gabrielli describes it, a “nuova fobia dell’incrocio razziale” [“new phobia of racial crossbreeding”], with the imperative to preserve the “prestigio della razza” [“prestige of the race”], to be intended as the newly-invented “Italian” race which was necessary as part of the dictator’s plan to recreate the Roman empire.



(Gabrielli 83, 87) In order to limit contact between the Italians and the “natives,” now considered as possible contaminators of Italian blood, the Duce Mussolini established a fascist version of apartheid in the colonies in 1936: military housing and pubs were separated from those of the indigenous peoples; “case di tolleranza” [“houses of tolerance”] were founded which were staffed by racially acceptable white prostitutes; married military personnel were obliged to bring their wives with them to Africa; and soldiers and officers who associated with indigenous women were threatened with grave measures, including imprisonment and being relieved of their duties and salary. (Gabrielli 88-89) A year later, Mussolini’s April 1937 law, the Royal Decree and Law 880, *Sanzioni per i rapporti d’indole coniugale tra cittadini e sudditi* [“Sanctions for the rapport of a conjugal nature between citizens and subjects”], rendered *madamato* marriages officially illegal: the ideology was that the Italian man, being the superior individual with “higher culture,” should have known to avoid such a relationship, therefore, he was heavily sanctioned with a one to five-year prison sentences and/or expulsion from the colony. (Gabrielli 92-94) In addition to legal measures which disciplined sexual relationships between colonizer and colonized, the fascist regime implemented a propaganda campaign, beginning with the January 9, 1937 article “Politica della razza” [“Politics of race”] in the newspaper, *La Stampa*, which warned of the biological peril of racial hybridism. (Gabrielli 90-91) In addition, popular magazines which promulgated a biologically-based racism were diffuse, such as *La difesa della razza* [“The defense of the (Italian) race”], and two congresses sponsored by the State were held on the “problema del meticcio” [“problem of cross-breeding”], namely, the Third Colonial Congress in 1937 and the Volta Conference in 1938. (Gabrielli 91) Lastly, the definitive ruling that excluded *meticci* children from every possibility of citizenship, with all concomitant rights and benefits, was the May 13, 1940 law, number 822, “*Norme relative ai meticci*” [“Norms concerning mixed-breeds”]: Article 3

stated that a *meticcio* child could not be recognized by his Italian citizen father; Article 4 declared that the child could not take even the father's last name; Article 7 denied the possibility of adoption or affiliation of the child by any Italian citizen; Article 5 conferred the entire responsibility of the financial support, education, and rearing of the child to the indigenous mother. (Gabrielli 102-103) It wasn't until August 3, 1947 when a legislative decree of the state, number 1096, restored the right to citizenship to *meticci* children, yet only those who were recognized by an Italian citizen parent.

Giulia Barrera in her "Patrilinearity, Race, and Identity: The Upbringing of Italo-Eritreans during Italian Colonialism" (2008) focuses, instead, on the social stigmas on the fate of children born to Italian fathers in the colonies.<sup>29</sup> Barrera likens the sexual exploitation of women in the colonies and the abandonment of the children born to these relationships as reflective of similar behavior among Italian men in their own country, citing as examples extra-marital relations and sexual abuses of domestic workers in which the child and his/her mother were often deserted. However, in the African colonies, this type of exploitative, irresponsible behavior was exacerbated given the even greater class differences between the Italian man and the indigenous woman as well as the concomitant factor of race, added to the national and political power disparity between colonizer and colonized. In addition, Barrera notes that the geographical and psychological distance from the homeland reduced the man's perceived sense of culpability toward his family in the colony. As was the case for Macoggi's protagonist, Barrera explains that, especially among military officers as opposed to lower-ranking soldiers, Italo-Eritrean children were most often not acknowledged nor supported by their fathers; the unique exception seemed to be among men who

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<sup>29</sup> Barrera's study focuses on the practice of *madamismo* in another Italian colony in Africa, Eritrea, however the arrangements between indigenous women and while male colonizers in Italy's other colonies in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Libya were similar as also sustained by Ruth Lyob's essay "Madamismo and Beyond: The Construction of Eritrean Women." (2008)

passed long periods in the colony or decided to reside there permanently. (Barrera 99-100). Moreover, Italian civil law, reflecting its heteropatriarchal ideology, prohibited the recognition of all children born out of wedlock by the father, even those born to Italian mothers, until 1975. (Barrera 105) Barrera highlights the deleterious psychosocial impact on *meticci* children born in the colonies given what she deems as the “patrilinearity” of culture in Eritrea: in Tigrinya culture, the dominant ethnic group in Eritrea from whence came most of the women who had relationships with Italian men, “a child’s social identity is defined by its father’s social identity,” even in the absence of the father himself. (Barrera 103-104) Thus, most Italo-Eritreans were raised as Italian culturally with respect to their schooling, religion, language, mode of dress, even without the father’s presence or recognition of his child. For the Eritreans, it was “incomprehensible” that a father would desert his own son or daughter and was greatly stigmatizing for the child, thereby, alienating him/her in the maternal community as well. (Barrera 104-105)

As was the fate of thousands of *meticci* children discarded by their Italian fathers during the colonial period, Fiorella, who was born in the late Sixties, is abandoned twice: first by her biological Italian father and yet again by her adoptive Italian father who had recognized her as his own child and even given her his surname. The colonel suddenly dies, leaving Fiorella, her mother, his *madama* or temporary comfort wife, and his newborn son with her in a disastrous financial predicament: they were denied any inheritance rights as his survivors and conferred no political-legal status by the Italian state, thus demonstrating the continuity of the colonial practice of *madamato* and the subhuman status of the *meticci* children more than two decades after Ethiopia’s independence from Italy. Owing to their economic, social, and political vulnerability, Fiorella’s mother is manipulated by her employer, the white, Italian proprietor of the boarding house where she works in Addis Abeba, to adopt her nine-year old daughter. Inculcated with the myth of the

superiority of life in the West, Selamawit believes Romana, the Italian woman, who promises to raise the child as her own and offer her a better life than her natural mother can. Yet, simultaneously, Romana threatens Selamawit and coerces her to relinquish her daughter to her: “Ci sono i debiti da pagare.” [“There are debts to pay.”] Given that Selamawit had quit her job at Romana’s hotel when she “married” Fiorella’s adoptive father, her former employer punishes her for having dared to imagine herself as the legitimate wife of an Italian, a man that Romana had coveted for herself. Thus, Romana intimidates Selamawit into relinquishing her child to her, exacting revenge for a perceived offense. In short, in Macoggi’s texts, the Italian woman is an interesting twist on the figure of the white male European colonizer who acquires a child from a young, penniless Ethiopian widow in order to settle an alleged debt. It is important to note that neither of Macoggi’s works, including *La nemesi della rossa* which includes references to the protagonist’s legal investigation of her adoption, testify to an examination by either the Ethiopian or the Italian authorities regarding the child’s adoption or her later immigration to Italy. The adult Fiorella, degreed in Law as the author herself, discovers that Romana had falsified the immigration documents, testifying that the child had no living relatives in Ethiopia, yet officials from neither country had verified this. Margaret Homans in *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility* (2013) argues that “contemporary critics of transnational adoptions” liken the adoption of Third World children by the rich and powerful to the acquisition of a commodity and, as such, the children are “categorized, labeled, described, and priced along racial lines.” (Homans 27, 30) Homans notes that opponents to this practice draw an analogy between transnational adoptions, which are often transracial as well, to exploitation of the children of the poor and powerless, similar to the Atlantic slave trade and the trafficking of women and children for international marriage and sexual exploitation; in the next section, this will be demonstrated to

be the case for Macoggi's protagonist who is essentially enslaved as an unpaid (child) employee in her adoptive mother's hotel.<sup>30</sup> (Homans 30-31) Moreover, Laura Briggs in *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (2012) claims that it is "difficult to distinguish" between legitimate and illegitimate adoptions when there are power constructs at play such as economics, nationality, and race.<sup>31</sup> She argues that even if the birth parents' informed consent to the adoption has been obtained, it may have been compromised, being "conditioned by war's aftermath, community dissolution, refugee status, poverty, violence, or other kinds of desperation," as is the case for Selamawit, a propertyless widow with a young daughter and a newborn son. (Briggs 208) Briggs further asserts that the informed consent for transracial and transnational adoptions often occurs as a result of "kidnapping, threats, or bribes," as is also true in Fiorella's case. (Briggs 208) Therefore, Selamawit's subalternity as a Black, propertyless, Ethiopian young woman conditions her exploitation: first, in marriage as the *madama* of two Italian military officers who abandon her and their children with her and, secondly, in maternity given that her child could be forcibly taken from her by a white Italian business-owner, confirming that power dichotomies rooted in race, gender, nationality, and class were yet operational in the late Sixties and early Seventies in decolonized Ethiopia.

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<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Homans presents multiple sides of the argument to transracial and transnational adoptions and, in the end, does not advocate for discontinuation of them. Instead, she calls for recognition of the inherent power dynamics involved in transracial/national adoptions and argues "instead, for the importance of facing and addressing the realities of the adoption marketplace" by confronting them directly, first by recognizing that economics plays a fundamental role in all forms of parenthood. As she so frankly states in a chapter of her book on adoption narratives entitled "Money and Love:" "Love is not separable from the economic. Raising children, adopted or not, requires resources" and she holds that parenting, adoptive or not, is a consumeristic activity from a financial standpoint which depends on adequate financial capital. (Homans 25-26, 33)

<sup>31</sup> Laura Briggs' book deals specifically with adoption of Latin-American children, particularly Guatemalan children, by wealthy white Americans, yet many of her claims are pertinent to the adoption of Fiorella in Macoggi's autobiographical tales, specifically, the factors of race, nationality, and economic class are fundamental in the acquisition of a poor Black Ethiopian child as property to be exploited at will without consequences by a wealthy white Italian woman.

### III. THE DISTORTED MIRROR: THE PERSISTENCE OF COLONIAL RACIAL DIALECTICS IN REDUCING THE RACIAL OTHER TO SKIN<sup>32</sup>

To achieve Selamawit's well-intentioned aspiration of a better life for her daughter, a "futuro benevolo" ["benevolent future"] as promised by Romana, Fiorella becomes the "ye-signora liğ"<sup>33</sup> ["the daughter of the madam"]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 54, 86) As such, her adoptive mother eliminates nearly all contact between the child and her natural family. Both of Macoggi's works revolve around the consequences of the painful loss of the child's (natural, Black, Ethiopian) mother with the substitution of the horrific, formidable (white, Italian) *zia* figure who falsely promises to provide Fiorella with a better life. This "better life", which is referred to with none too little irony throughout the narration as "la grandezza del Maghreb" ["the greatness of the West"], consists of the child being exploited as labor for long hours in her adoptive aunt's hotel and restaurant when she is only ten-years old. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 29) When a political uprising in Ethiopia threatens Romana's livelihood and well-being, she effectively abducts Fiorella at the conclusion of the first novel, deceiving immigration authorities by declaring that the child has no living relatives and claiming herself as the child's legal guardian. However, at the beginning of the second text, immediately upon their arrival in Italy which is sarcastically designated as "paradiso"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Reduced to skin" is an expression employed by Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001). It is a derivation of Frantz Fanon's concept of "epidermalization" in which the black individual's personhood "is reduced to skin" through racism, depriving him/her of ego and a sense of agency. (Oliver 33). The concepts of idealist and materialist dialectics of race is adapted from Michelle Wright's *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004). These theories will be described in detail in this section and put into conversation with Macoggi's texts under examination.

<sup>33</sup> As is typical in many works of Italian postcolonial literature, Macoggi includes terms in one of her native languages, Amharic, for terms that are not effectively translatable in Italian.

<sup>34</sup> "Paradiso" is a significant term in the author's two texts under examination in that the title of the first version of Macoggi's novel *Kkeywa* (2012) is *La via per il paradiso* ["*The Road Towards Paradise*"] (2004), which she published under the pen name Carla Amete Ghebriel di Liberio. In fact, Macoggi frequently referred to herself with this appellation in previous publications (or, alternatively, as Amete G. Di Liberio) until *Kkeywa* was published when she reverted to her given name. She explains the significance of this moniker in a public discourse that she delivered,

[“paradise”] by the adult Fiorella, the *zia* promptly abandons the young girl to a series of temporary homes and convents since she is no longer useful to her as an unpaid employee. The second novel concludes when Fiorella attains the age of majority and has no one to whom she can turn; homeless and hungry, she suffers a brief psychotic breakdown and is committed to a psychiatric hospital by her former guardians at which point the narration concludes.

This study interrogates Carla Macoggi’s sequential fictionalized memoirs around the theme of a child protagonist whose notion of self is disrupted, fractured and, in the end, refashioned in the image of racialized abject Other via her interactions with numerous Italian “colonizers,” yet the events take place in the Seventies and Eighties in Italy. As her mother before her, Fiorella, an “African” *meticcia* girl, is vulnerable to exploitation and abuses by the Italians with whom she comes into contact, notably well after the official period of Italy’s colonial occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941). Fiorella’s relationships with these individuals, who claim to be her guardians nonetheless, are characterized by neglect, corruption, and desertion. Eventually, the hierarchical relations between the child and her Italian substitute parents, which plainly evoke a master/slave dialectic, destroy the protagonist’s integral sense of self, nullify her memory and understanding of

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“Parola chiave ‘identità’” [“Key Word ‘Identity’”], at the *Oltre il margine* conference [“Beyond the Border”] which was part of the Literature and Migration Festival that took place from November 11-14, 2010 in Brescia, Italy. Briefly, Macoggi reports having always felt “profondamente italiana” [“profoundly Italian”], “una bianca tra i bianchi” [“a white among whites”], until a university friend incomprehensibly insisted on calling her Carol which, significantly, is a foreigner’s name in Italy. This precipitated an identity crisis in her and she returned to Ethiopia to inquire about her name with her mother and grandmother who reassured her that her birth name was, in fact, Carla. However, her godmother informed her that since Carla was not a saint’s name, her baptismal name was “Amete Gabrieli”, meaning “slave of Saint Gabriel.” This initiated her reflection about her ancestors, who most likely had been slaves, and her personal study of Italy’s colonialism in Ethiopia. At this point, she began to call herself Amete G. Netza that in *g’eez*, (the now extinct, ancient language of the Ethiopian Empire yet still adopted as the liturgical idiom of the Ethiopian and Eritrean orthodox churches) means “Free Slave of Gabriel.” Macoggi likens “Amete Netza” as well to her given name, Carla, which means “free woman” in German/Latin, noting that “ero nata schiava e libera nello stesso momento” [“I was born both slave and free at the same time”]. A transcription of this conference speech can be found in *Scritture migranti: Rivista di scambi interculturali*, Bologna: Università di Bologna Dipartimento di Italianistica, no. 7, 2013, pp. 10-11 and a videorecording of this same discourse can be located in the “Special Content” section of the documentary *SomaliaItalia* edited by Simone Brioni. (2012)

her own personal history, and, consequently, provoke a psychological collapse which concludes the second text in the final chapter entitled “Tragedia in Mezzo Atto” [“Tragedy in a Half Act”]. The events narrated in Macoggi’s sequential autobiographical stories demonstrate “postcolonial pathology,” the incontrovertible causal relationship between persistent racial binaries and psychopathology in the individuals subjected to them.

To consider the psycho-social modalities in which a series of Italian women tyrants,<sup>35</sup> clothed as surrogate parents, disrupt, fragment, erase, and reconfigure the protagonist’s identity, Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage theory will be employed as a theoretical framework. Briefly, Lacan assigned particular importance to the so-called *Aha-Erlebnis* moment in human cognitive and psychological development when an infant recognizes himself in a glass.<sup>36</sup> (Lacan 1) According to Lacan’s model, in this instant, which typically occurs around six months of age, the baby conceives of him/herself as a separate, whole entity, distinct from the mother and all other persons. (Lacan 3)

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<sup>35</sup> “Tyrant” is adopted here in the etymological sense of the word, coming from the Latin *tyrannus*, descending from the Greek for “dominator,” “prince,” “owner.” Fiorella’s body/person is utilized and considered as property, in the sense of ownership, by the Italian guardians who are presumably caring for her. Other derivations of tyrant are particularly relevant in the case of the events in Fiorella’s life events: *tur/tuar* meaning “to push” or “to act with violence;” *tara* signifying *signore* in the sense of “gentlemen,” “lord” or “master;” *tura* implying “powerful” or even “overbearing;” “bullying;” *turreti* “to possess;” *trycho* meaning “torment,” “oppression” as will be demonstrated in this study. (*Dizionario etimologia online*. Web. 22 Mar 2017. [www.etimo.it](http://www.etimo.it)). An important consideration in the analysis of Fiorella’s story will be feminization of the figure of the colonist, as nearly all of the individuals who dominate and abuse her are Italian women.

<sup>36</sup> Lacan presented his mirror stage concept for the first time at the 14<sup>th</sup> International Psychoanalytic Congress in 1936 and an amended version at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1949. His paper, entitled “Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu’elle nous est révélée dans l’expérience psychanalytique,” was published in a revised form in his *Écrits* (1966). A contemporary social-psychologist, Michael Billig, notes that more current research in psychology and education supports the importance that a predecessor of Lacan, psychologist Paul Guillaume in his *Imitation of Children* (1926), placed on imitation as opposed to Lacan’s hypothesis of an infant’s instant *Gestalt* recognition of his/her personhood. Moreover, Guillaume emphasized the importance of long-term social interactions in forming a child’s internal notion of self and the world (Billig 22) (see also Sue Walters 2014 cited in this essay). This last point is particularly relevant in the discussion of identity formation and subject/objecthood in the racialized Other: that is, an image of self is constantly being formed and renegotiated over long periods of time through interactions with other individuals. As this essay argues in the context of Macoggi’s narration of a *meticcia* girl and her interactions with modern-day Italian colonizers throughout her childhood, an individual’s “positionality” in the social-political reality (based on gender, nationality, race, socioeconomic class) is determinate in establishing the relative position and role that this person is assigned as subject or object.



The *imago*/image of him/herself in the mirror gives rise to the child's permanent, mental image of the self, the "ideal-I." (Lacan 2-3) The psychoanalyst argued that mirror recognition is a fundamental intellectual passage in creating the child's "irreducible" ego, his self-concept, which Lacan designated as the "mental permanence of the I." (Lacan 3) Other developmental psychologists, coeval with Lacan as well as contemporary scholars in psychiatry, personality theory and education (see note 33), have expanded the notion of the mirror beyond the physical, optical *Gestalt* reflection which a child recognizes in a glass to include the "gaze" of others: specifically, the "gaze" can be defined as the metaphorical mirror "that the baby experiences in, for example, the gaze of the mother and from the wide range of [...] persons that it encounters in the world." (Walters 101) To wit, mirror stage theory can be extended to consider ego formation as ever in evolution, a years' long process, which is weightily influenced by the child's relationships with others, particularly his/her parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adult authority figures (Walters 102). Sue Walters, educational ethnographer who examines the impact of race, gender, and class in the classroom, asserts that, via a process of identification, the child "takes on" or "takes in" what he/she perceives "in the mirror of people's responses to us [...] the 'out there' comes to be 'in here', to be taken in to our sense of self." (Walters 102) Therefore, depending on the positive or negative reflections that a child experiences in his interactions with significant individuals, his/her self-image is vulnerable to being continually constructed and refashioned for years. The notion of the mirror stage in relation to the black-racialized Other will be explored further in this section, taking inspiration from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

In the case of Fiorella, Macoggi's protagonist, mirror stage theory is fundamental in considering how the child's subjecthood is dismantled and remodeled in keeping with racial

dichotomies or, according to philosopher Michelle Wright, in a Hegelian master-slave binary:<sup>37</sup> specifically, the mirroring of self that Fiorella experiences via her interactions with a multitude of Italian women alter her self-concept, her “ideal I,” from that of a child who is worthy to be nurtured and protected into a racialized object/worker/animal. The reflections that Fiorella receives from her various Italian guardians are those of: an “operaio adulto” [“adult laborer”], a “piccola soldatessa” [“a little soldier girl”], a “piccola schiava” [“a little slave”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 74, 86, 96) Paradoxically, those who claim to “volarle bene” [“love her”] exploit their positions of power rooted in race, nationality, class, and religion for their own petty gains. To guarantee her survival in a white, Catholic, propertied, Italian ambient where Fiorella quickly learns that she has little to

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<sup>37</sup> Michelle Wright’s *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004) provides an excellent overview, analysis, and critique of the intellectual tradition that created the notion of “black” as inferior racialized Other. She gives particular attention to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s notion of the Negro as the “Other-from-without” (as in “outside the nation”). Wright demonstrates that Hegel, in the introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, first published in 1837, constructed the binary of Reason/European versus Irrational/non-European/Negro to reify the notion of the modern European state and, hence, the European Subject/citizen. Through the constitution of this Manichean racial-political dichotomy, the notion of “progress” justified the “colonialist imperative” of the West to “civilize” “savage” peoples, to include enslaving them. These savages, the Negroes, were defined by Hegel as the “antithesis” of the European Subject who is necessarily located within the nation-state. For Hegel, the Negro is ahistorical, outside reason, outside the nation-state, the “antithesis” of the European. Yet, paradoxically, the Negro is “necessary” to create its polar opposite, the European Subject, and in turn concretize the notion of the modern nation-state. (Wright 39) Importantly, Wright observes that “Hegel’s idea of the modern state is still very much alive in Europe and the United States.” (Wright 37) In fact, she locates the central problem/question of postcolonial theory and literature as the “attempt to move out of this binary” which is still very much present and held as fundamentally valid. (Wright 39) Wright’s much more lengthy analysis of Hegelian dialectic in regards to race can be found on pp. 33-39 of the cited volume. Wright’s study includes, as well, Thomas Jefferson’s dichotomy of American white/black-Negro-slave, human/animal, which she denominates as the “Other-from-within” notion of Black, as in within-the-nation yet still outside it. (see pp. 54-65 of Wright’s work) Another construction of “blackness” that Wright treats is Count Arthur de Gobineau’s “Other-from-within” which is based, not on state, history, and reason as is Hegel’s concept of the Negro, but on the inequality of the “three human races: Negroid, Caucasoid, Mongoloid” described in his *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853). Wright argues that de Gobineau’s notion of race is based primarily on class and is motivated by the desire to maintain the “pure bloodlines” of nobility. (Wright 39-53) Wright’s study is particularly important in noting the widely disparate philosophical constructions on which the figure of the black Other is constructed which, in turn, demonstrates the fundamental logical invalidity of these. Her detailed examination of Black in its variate forms as “Other-from-within” and “Other-from-without” are valuable by exposing: “the lack of cohesion in Western racist discourses [...] the way in which theories of Black inferiority are based on personal agendas and beliefs rather than any sort of objective criteria [...] (and) these differences help explain the different types of counter-discourses that emerge in their wake.” (Wright 64)

no value and is not viewed as a child, the nine-year old girl must behave as/transform herself into an animal:

preda del regno degli animali, che quando si accorgono del loro assalitore, considerano l'immobilità l'unica arma di difesa, mentre in realtà, vorrebbero senz'alcun dubbio possedere un super potere che li rendesse invisibili, inattaccabili, *inesistenti*. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 70, author's emphasis).

[“a prey of the animal kingdom who, when they become aware of their assailant, consider immobility the only defense weapon, when in reality, they would without a doubt wish to possess a super power that renders them invisible, unassailable, *inexistent*.”]

Thus, via the reflections of self that the child “takes in”, “takes on” from her series of Italian caregivers, Fiorella's identity is deconstructed and refashioned to be consistent with their mirroring she is a mere racialized object, so “brutta così bruciata, così nera” [“ugly, so burnt, so black”] in her adoptive mother's words, a non-being whose own “esperienza personale non aveva nessun valore” [“personal experience had no value”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 80, 87)

The critical event that gives rise to the dismantling of Fiorella's ego occurs when her adoptive (white Italian) father suddenly dies, leaving the child and her (black Ethiopian) mother without protection or financial resources and, thus, vulnerable to exploitation. Overnight, the protagonist's existence is irrevocably bifurcated into a distinct “before” and “after,” defined by the moment when she is relegated to a new, assigned status of a *meticcia*, a previously unknown, exotic term to her. Underscoring the momentousness of this misfortune which would determine her eventual fate, the protagonist declares on the first page of the novel:<sup>38</sup> “Avevo sette anni e mezzo quando

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<sup>38</sup>Actually, Fiorella commences her narration in first person in the third chapter of *Kkeywa*, after a prologue and an initial chapter which are told from the third person point of view. These two first chapters provide the necessary background for the rest of the story by recounting the circumstances of how a renegade, former Company Commander of an Italian colonial troop came to be the adoptive father of a *meticcia* child who was not his own. The officer's epiphany that the civilizing mission of the Italians in Eastern Africa was, in fact, a “sin” and “evil” in nature and, quoting Wenders from the film *Il cielo sopra Berlino*, a clear demonstration that “c'è veramente il male e gente veramente cattiva (nel mondo).” [“there truly is evil (in the world) and people who are truly evil.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 24) After these preliminary two chapters told from her adoptive father's point of view, the remainder of the memoir as well as the subsequent work, *Nemesi*, is expressed from Fiorella's viewpoint in first person.

morì mio padre.” [“I was seven and half years old when my father died.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 31)

Likewise, the entire subsequent chapter, not by chance entitled “La *fine* del padre” [“The *end* of my father”], is dedicated to the single adversity that will determine Fiorella’s social, political, and racial standing, “il mio status di orfana, di *priva* di padre” [“my status of orphan, *deprived* of a father”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 37, 41, both author’s emphasis) Fiorella’s “before,” the idyllic first seven years prior to her father’s death, is rendered nearly mythical in a single, initial paragraph in *Kkeywa* in which she nostalgically recalls the extensive planning and elaborate festivities which surrounded her annual birthday celebration. Employing the imperfect tense which invokes a fairy tale image of her early childhood, Fiorella’s bittersweet recollection of her birthday party makes evident how her attentive parents, especially her mother, confirmed/mirrored to her that she was a beloved and treasured child:

La ricorrenza che più di ogni altra ricordo di aver festeggiato con grande emozione durante la mia infanzia era il mio compleanno. In quell’occasione la mamma mi acquistava il vestito nuovo, le scarpe e le calze di cotone traforato [...], tutto rigorosamente prodotto in Italia, una torta accanto cui venivano accese tante candele quanti erano gli anni che compivo e, infine, un fotografo che mi immortalava vestita di tutto punto [...] io ero [...] protagonista dell’evento in casa mia, soprattutto per volontà e immensa gioia di mia madre. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 31)

[“The occasion that I remember more than any other as having celebrated with great excitement during my childhood was my birthday. On that day, my mother bought me a new dress, new shoes, and new cotton, embroidered tights [...] everything rigorously made in Italy, a cake on which were lit as many candles as the number of years I had turned and, finally, a photographer who immortalized the perfectly dressed me [...] I was the protagonist of this event in my home, mostly thanks to the volition and immense joy of my mother.”]

In a similar vein, Fiorella dolefully recalls the period of her life before the loss of her father when she relished a nearly symbiotic relationship with her mother: “fino a quasi sette anni non avevo mai dormito senza la mia mamma accanto, mangiavo ciò che lei mi preparava [...] era lei che ogni sera mi faceva il bagnetto, mi asciugava con un profumato borotalco e mi metteva la canottiera pulita.” [“until I was almost seven years old, I had never slept without my mommy beside me, I

ate what she prepared for me [...] it was she that gave me a baby bath every evening, she dried me with a perfumed powder and she dressed me with clean undershirt.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 32). Before her father’s demise, Fiorella’s mother had been “tutto il mio universo” [“my whole universe”], “colei che rappresentava tutto il mondo che mi era noto” [“she who represented the entire known world to me”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 31, 33) During the brief “before” of Fiorella’s childhood, the first seven years of her life prior to her father’s death, her parents lovingly and consistently reflected an image to her of wholeness, integrity, and value by their affirmations that she was “una bella bambina, *ye-ne konjo*” [“a beautiful little girl”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 64) Therefore, under the tutelage of her intact family, Fiorella founded her self-concept on the received representations from her parents that she was a beautiful, worthy, treasured child who had never been referred to or defined by race or nationality.

Thereafter, the protagonist switches abruptly from the imperfect to the perfect tense, clearly demarcating the divide in her childhood when the family’s reality changes overnight. The affirming reflections received from her parents that she was a “bella bambina” meritorious of elaborate birthday celebrations, new festive clothes, and being commemorated in photographs are abruptly destabilized with the untimely misfortune of her adoptive father’s death, the Italian colonel. Again, Fiorella’s and her mother’s predicament is emblematic of the *madamato* temporary marital arrangement which was diffuse during the colonial period, nearly a quarter century before Fiorella’s (and Macoggi’s) birth and the events narrated in *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* and *La nemesi della rossa*. In a radio interview, Macoggi recognized that her story and the violence that she suffered as a result were, in her words, “anachronistic,” out of place in time and history by decades: “Io sarei dovuta essere immune a tutto questo, ma mi è capitato, è successo a me.” [“I should have been immune to all of this, but it happened to me, it happened to me.”] (Macoggi

Interview, *Le strade di Babele*) Teresa Solis confirms Macoggi's perception of the "anachronism" of Fiorella's story which manifests in the persistence of colonial power dynamics in post-Empire Ethiopia. In her article "Meticciato e memoria culturale" (2012) on Macoggi's first work, *Kkeywa*, Solis asserts: "Il testo di Macoggi mette in luce...(un) percorso di formazione identitaria, percorso costretto a svilupparsi in un contesto storicamente post-coloniale ma ancora fortemente impregnato di pregiudizi razziali che vigevano all'epoca dell'Impero." (Solis "Meticciato", Intro., par. 3) ["Macoggi's text brings to light...(an) itinerary of identity formation, an itinerary forced to develop in a context historically postcolonial, but still strongly saturated with racial prejudices that were in force in the age of the Empire."] For example, Macoggi's texts make evident that Fiorella's mother was relegated to the status of a rented wife, a colonial *madama*, with no rights to her Italian husband's property or military survivor benefits: upon his death, these pass to his official, state-sanctioned family in Italy. His adult daughter, Fiorella, discovers in her investigation of the circumstances of her life which comprise Macoggi's second text that her father, like many other European men in the former colonies, was also the "marito e padre di famiglia [...] dell'Italia." ["husband and the father of a family [...] in Italy."] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 21) Fiorella, who had been formally adopted by him and who carries his last name, receives no provision or recognition by the Italian state, as so many thousands of *meticci* children before her. In fact, Solis declares that "il meticciano (è) tema e motore principale del racconto di Macoggi" ["*il meticciano* (is) the theme and primary driving force of Macoggi's tale"]; even though the historical moment of Fiorella's story is situated long after Ethiopia's independence from Italy, the child protagonist, just as the *meticci* children abandoned by their Italian fathers in the colonies decades prior, is still subjected to the same race-based colonial regimes of "segregazione, inferiorità ed esclusione." ["segregation, inferiority, and exclusion."] (Solis "Meticciato" Intro. par. 4)

With the demise of her provisional husband and the father of her two children who made no provisions for them, Selamawit makes a concerted effort to survive by working two full-time jobs: she manages two different restaurants to support her seven-year old daughter as well as her new baby son. Comprehensibly, Selamawit becomes increasingly more distant and depressed which causes Fiorella, confused and frightened, to perceive her mother now as “così lontana e diversa da quella che conoscevo un tempo” [“so far away and different than who I knew at one time”], “viva, ma assente, eterea” [“alive, yet absent, ethereal”], “spesso amareggiata [...] mi svegliavo la notte e la sentivo piangere nel letto.” [“often bitter [...] I would wake up in the night and hear her crying in the bed.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 41, 42, 44) Thus, Fiorella’s “orphan status,” as she describes herself in *Kkeywa*, is characterized not only by the loss of her father, but also by increasing separation and estrangement from her exhausted mother. Due to their precarious financial situation as well as surging political unrest in Addis Abeba, Selamawit is forced to move several times with her children in search of a safe-haven. The dizzying succession of temporary living situations--five moves in two years’ time between provisory abodes in the homes of various friends, the grandmother’s house in another city, and her aunt and uncle’s home--is perceived by Fiorella as further loss, yet another subtraction from their previous tranquil life: “ogni volta perdevo qualcosa” [“every time, I lost something”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 43) In the end, the young family loses all their belongings when their home is sacked by anti-monarchy demonstrators. Nine-year old Fiorella recognizes that, with the demise of her father, “non c’era nessuno che mi proteggesse” [“there was no one who protected me”] and “il perfetto è finito, è passato” [“perfection is finished, is passed”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 51, 56)

It is during her stay in one of the temporary homes that Fiorella discovers that she is *diversa* [“different”], that she is racially and culturally marked in some way. While living temporarily in

the house of friends, her mother apologizes for her daughter who eats like a Westerner, demonstrating the patrilinearity of culture in *meticci* children in Italy's colonies as described by Barrera: Fiorella refuses to eat with her hands from a common plate, like the others at the table, and she recoils when someone attempts to put food in her mouth, a sign of hospitality and affection towards children in Ethiopia. Moreover, in the house of her cousins, her aunt makes her aware that her hair is different from that of her cousins, too silky and smooth to braid. It is in this moment that Fiorella hears herself referred to for the first time as *kkeywa*, meaning "rossa" ["red"] in Amharic, a person with lighter skin color, from whence comes the title of Macoggi's first work. Her cousins also goodnaturedly call her *kəlləswa*, signifying "sangue mista" ["mixed blood"], since she is the daughter of a *ferenġ* ["a white foreigner"], yet these appellations are conferred on her by her relatives without malice and imply no judgment of the value or positionality of her person, unlike *meticcio* by which she is framed by her adoptive Italian mother.<sup>39</sup> (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 47) In a radio interview, Macoggi contrasts the significance of the terms *kkeywa*, *kəlləswa*, and *meticcio* in the two nations/cultural environments in which she lived: in Ethiopia, these labels have a neutral value being a "mondo più rispettoso delle differenze" ["a world more respectful of

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<sup>39</sup> However, in the Italian context, *meticcio* and related terms, unlike the neutral *kkeywa* in Amharic, historically have had a negative racial connotation. In his juridical study on the racist politics of the children born of relationships between indigenous women and white colonizers during Italy's fascist empire, Gianluca Gabrielli notes that terms such as *meticcio* ["mixed breed"] are problematic, being falsely imbued with scientific meaning. Gabrielli underscores that expressions such as *ibrido* ["hybrid"], *incrocio* ["genetic cross"], *figli di unioni miste* ["children of mixed couplings"], *prole mista* ["mixed progeny"], *mulatto*, *mezzosangue* ["half blood/crossbreed"], and *bastardo* are invented, exclusionary terms that were and still are employed to create racial hierarchies. Rather, Gabrielli asserts that these locutions are historically and socially constructed and have no scientific basis. (Gabrielli 77-78) Another study which confirms the social-political fabrication of the notion of the Italian-Aryan race is Fabrizio De Donno, "La razza ario-mediterranea: Ideas of Race and Citizenship in Colonial and Fascist Italy, 1885-1941" (2006). However, De Donno approaches the problem from a different perspective (mainly, linguistic, anthropological). He notes that, in Italy, the idea of the Italian-Aryan race was inaugurated by Angelo De Gubernatis, Italian Indologist. De Gubernatis proposed common Indo-European origins among the Greeks, Indians, and Italians/Italics based on linguistic similarities between Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Italian, as well as other modern European languages. (De Donno 395-396)



differences”], whereas in Italy the same terms are often employed in a derogatory or, at best, socially and politically exclusionary manner. (Macoggi Interview, *Le strade di Babele*)

Therefore, Selamawit’s financial and social vulnerability and the lack of feasible prospects to improve her family’s situation explain the solution that she envisions in entrusting her nine-year old daughter to Romana Gridoni, however, for Fiorella her mother’s “decision,” informed and consensual or coerced, is experienced by her young daughter as: “così iniziò la mia odissea.” [“in that way, my odyssey began.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 44). As Macoggi’s literary reference to Homer’s hero, Ulysses, implies, Fiorella’s odyssey necessitates a physical voyage which will definitively separate her from her beloved mother, her siblings, her extended family, and her homeland with its religion, language, codes of conduct, and culture when her adoptive mother immigrates with the child to Italy at the conclusion of *Kkeywa*. Yet, unbeknownst to her and her natural mother, Fiorella’s odyssey will also be metaphysical in that it will demand that she assume, “take on” and “take in” in ethnographer Sue Walter’s terms, a new subjugated, racialized identity of *kkeywa/meticcia* [“interracial”, “mixed breed”]. (Walters 102) Becoming the “*ye-signora lig*” [“daughter of the madam”] bears a weighty price: the child will lose her identity as a beloved child, must renounce all family ties and personal history, and will be perpetually assigned by her new mother to the inferior status of “*habišà* [“indigenous person”] with an intrinsic value between animal and slave as will be demonstrated. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 80, 86)

Romana Gridoni<sup>40</sup>, the name of Fiorella’s new *zia* [“aunt”] as the child is required to call her, is a pregnant name choice on the part of the author: Romana suggests “Roman” and by metonymy “Italian,” implying a representative model of an Italian individual/woman, at least in

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<sup>40</sup> In fact, in Macoggi’s previous published version of *Kkeywa*, *La via per il paradiso* (2004), the name of the *zia* was not Romana but Leontina, a name consonant with her Emilia-Romagna origins. Thus, Macoggi’s choice to change her name to Romana in the later text, *Kkeywa* (2011), was purposeful and meaningful. (Macoggi *Via* 50).

Fiorella's experience. Gridoni evokes "*grido*" ["shout", "yell"] with the addition of the suffix "*oni*" meaning "big" or "loud," referring to the woman's typical way of interacting with her adoptive daughter. Thus, Macoggi's selection of the moniker Romana Gridoni signifies for the protagonist a prototypical, aggressive Italian woman who is "so different" from her loving mother and "le madri d'Africa (che) curano i loro cuccioli per ore." ["the African mothers (who) take care of their pups/babies for hours."] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 32) Alternatively, the name Romana Gridoni could even suggest a feminized version of the Roman/Italian invader/colonist: it is not by chance that, once Fiorella understands the terms of the rapport with her new adoptive mother which is formulated in the colonist/colonizer, civilized/savage, European/African, master/slave dichotomy, the little girl conceives of the woman as a "colonnello-dittatore" ["colonel-dictator"] and refers to her own role as the woman's "piccola schiava" ["little slave"]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 70) Never told why or for how long she will live with her new strange *zia*, the frightened nine-year old child is perplexed by Romana, a type of woman she has never encountered before: "una donna così diversa da quelle della mia famiglia, apparentemente fataliste e attratte dalla ricerca dell'essenza della vita, povere eppure così ricche [...] mi parevano l'immagine della serenità." ["a woman so different from those in my family, outwardly fatalistic and drawn by the search for the essence of life, poor yet so rich [...] they seemed to me the image of serenity."] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 57-58). In contrast to her natural (black Ethiopian) mother, aunts, and grandmother, in the innocent little girl's eyes, Romana is a garish, depraved caricature of a woman, which is a clear capsizing of the European/African, civilized/savage binary by the author. In the innocent little girl's eyes, her new mother is depicted as nearly a monster; she is the woman with: "labbra dipinte" ["painted lips"], "un'acconciatura rossastra" ["an ugly red coiffure"], who "sorrideva in modo innaturale" ["smiled in an unnatural way"], who had "volgari risate" ["vulgar cackles"], who "non poteva vivere senza

la sua quotidiana pasticca azzurra di Valium” [“who couldn’t live without her daily blue Valium tablet”], whose signature odor is garlic, and who passes gas in bed. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 52, 53, 93 and *Nemesi* 22) Later, as an adult, Fiorella reflects on her aunt’s character, observing that Romana’s unique passions consist in accumulating money and lovers: “la zia e la pensione Lombardia erano insomma un tutt’uno, e la cosa [...] più divertente per lei era stare alla cassa a intascare soldi.” [“my aunt and the Lombardy Boarding House were, in short, one unified whole, and the most entertaining thing [...] for her was to stand at the cash register and pocket money.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 22) The vulgar portrait that Fiorella paints of greedy, lascivious Romana provides a satiric inversion of the superiority of the Italian woman to the *habiša* [“indigenous”] woman, including Fiorella’s mother, and an ironic comment on Romana’s “il suo ruolo di civilizzatrice” [“her role as civilizer”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 88) Even a young, naïve child recognizes that, even though Romana is wealthy, powerful, white, and Italian/European, she is no role model: “Quella donna chi voleva *emulare*?” [“That woman, who wanted to *emulate* her?”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 70, author’s emphasis)

Nevertheless, favored with the power that property, race, and European nationality confer, just as a colonel-dictator, Romana doesn’t hesitate to wield these privileges to assign/reflect to Fiorella her new condition of slave/animal. As such, the child’s body is immediately appropriated by the Italian woman who simultaneously and incoherently purports to be the child’s adoptive mother. In a disturbing scene in *Kkeywa* which recalls the violent, dehumanizing initiation rite of Holocaust victims to concentration camps, the very day Fiorella arrives to live in the hotel with the *zia*, she is violently shorn like a sheep or a dog without explanation or warning by a man she has never seen before:

La proprietaria del Lombardia (Romana) [...] mi accompagnò al primo piano e mi lasciò sola con il signor Gianni, incaricato di lavarmi i capelli [...] (lui) districò i miei capelli e

poi mi coprì con una stoffa che mi allacciò dietro alla nuca. Guardavo attonita questi strani preparativi, e un brivido mi corse lungo la schiena quando vidi un paio di forbici luccicanti tra le dita di quel signore brizzolato. [...] (prese) l'arma tagliente [...] Stavo per assistere a uno scempio, viverlo [...] La mia chioma, che, per volontà di mia madre [...] nessuna lama affilata aveva mai sfiorato, fu ridotta a poche decine di millimetri di capelli che coprivano il mio cranio. Tutto avvenne in fretta. Non pronunciai neppure una parola. Forse il terrore e l'impossibilità di reagire non mi facevano neanche respirare. [...] A terra c'erano ciocche che avevano condiviso la mia esistenza sin da quando stavo nel grembo di mia madre. Erano sul pavimento, senza vita [...] Non capivo il perché di tutto ciò. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 60-61)

[“The owner of the Lombardy hotel (Romana) [...] accompanied me to the first floor and left me alone with Mr. Gianni who was charged with washing my hair [...] he undid my hair and then he covered me with a piece of material that he tied behind my neck. I speechlessly watched these strange preparations, and a shiver ran along my spine when I saw a pair of shiny scissors in the fingers of that man with the greying hair. [...] (he took) the sharp weapon [...] I was about to witness a massacre, to live one [...] My mane, which, for the wishes of my mother, [...] had never been touched by a sharp blade, was reduced to a few dozen millimeters of hair which covered my cranium. Everything happened in a hurry. I didn't say even one word. Perhaps it was the terror and the impossibility to react that didn't allow me to even breathe. [...] On the ground were the locks that had shared my existence since I was in my mother's womb. They were on the ground, without life [...] I didn't understand why all this was happening.”]

Significantly, Fiorella employs terms of weaponry and violence to describe her “welcoming” initiation to the home of her *zia*: “forbici luccicanti” [“shiny scissors”], “l'arma tagliente” [“cutting weapon”], “scempio” [“slaughter”], “terrore”, “senza vita” [“without life”]. Traumatized by the inexplicable shearing by the “orco-barbiere” [“ogre/pedophile-barber”], the child quickly realizes that: “Lontana dalla mia mamma e i miei parenti, ero in balia di chiunque volesse esercitare le proprie manie.” [“Far from my mommy and my relatives, I was at the mercy of whoever wanted to carry out their own obsessions.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 61) The same day, she is stripped nude and bathed with an unknown blonde boy, again without explanation, who laughingly encouraged by Romana remarks openly on the “ugly blackness” of Fiorella as they bathe together. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 63) Both of Macoggi's texts cite many other occasions in which Fiorella's body is violated while under the *zia*'s tutelage, many of which constitute *bona fide* child

abuse. For example, in *Kkeywa* which comprises the first ten years of Fiorella's life up to a year after her adoption by Fiorella, the nine year old child reports that, knowing that the *zia* despises corpulence due to the woman's constant comments about what and how she eats, the girl learns to starve herself or face continuous haranguing: "preoccupata di non dare un dispiacere alla zia, sapevo di dovermi mantenere esile come un fuscello: non dovevo ingrassare, dovevo mangiare poco." ["worried about displeasing my aunt, I knew that I had to keep myself thin as a rail: I couldn't get fat, I had to eat very little."] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 85) Then, as a mere fifth-grader, Fiorella is charged by Romana to oversee the woman's restaurant, respond to telephone calls, write the daily menu, operate the cash register, and manage the employee payroll so that the woman can entertain her various lovers. Patently, Fiorella's duties as an (unpaid) "operaio adulto" ["adult manual laborer"], "lavoro minorile" ["child labor], "una piccola soldatessa" ["a little soldier girl"] at the service of her new mother come at a cost to her education. Her natural mother, Selamwait, had highly prioritized Fiorella's education, a value which the girl would retain. Romana, instead, requires Fiorella to skip lunch so that she can work her lengthy shift in the restaurant, doesn't permit the child to read or do homework until late at night when her shift is finished, and rarely allows her to have play dates with her only school friend. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 74, 86, 96) Other episodes in which Fiorella's person is appropriated by Italian caregivers continue in Macoggi's second text, *La nemesi della rossa*, which encompasses the protagonist's life events from age ten to twenty-four. At age twelve, Fiorella reports being sexually abused by one of Romana's lovers who forces her to participate in a "secret" swimming pool game in which he caresses her buttocks while she is underwater. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 36-37) In addition, immediately after her arrival in Italy with Romana at ten years old, the *zia* locks Fiorella in a hotel room for days with no explanation as to when she will return; when she does, she definitively abandons Fiorella, for the rest of her

childhood, to a series of temporary guardians and to an orphanage in a convent while the woman travels with her lover to the United States and New Zealand. In short, under her adoptive mother's care, Fiorella loses her status/identity as a beautiful *bambina* ["little girl"] to be cared for and protected: Her new *padrona-madre* ["boss-mother"] mirrors to Fiorella that she is an employee/property to be exploited, just like all the other *habišà* who work for the woman, hardly her daughter or even a child with legitimate needs for food, rest, study, and play. In Fiorella's words, "non credo che mi considerasse una bambina." ["I don't believe that she (Romana) considered me a little girl."] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 75).

Years later, the adult Fiorella in the second work, *La nemesi della rossa*, records her story and investigates the circumstances of her adoption in an attempt to make sense of the years of abuse, neglect, and abandonment that she suffered at the hands of Romana. It is only then that she identifies the colonialist/colonist dynamic that was operating in her relationship with the *zia* which she comprehends was an economically advantageous transaction for the woman: "...quella farsa, che fu registrata al Tribunale come atto di adozione. Romana prometteva allo Stato Etiopico che sarebbe stata la nuova madre di Fiorella. Aveva acquistato Fiorella. Per niente." ["...that farce, that was recorded at the Court House as an act of adoption. Romana promised to the Ethiopian State that she would be Fiorella's new mother. She had purchased Fiorella. For nothing."] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 23) Romana had wielded the might and privilege that race, property, and nationality confer to purchase a nine-year old little girl without payment. An entrepreneur who is solidly convinced of the superiority of the Italian race and nationality, Romana concedes the sole value of the Ethiopians, to include her adopted daughter, in economic terms, in the manual labor they provide. The master/slave, European/African, civilized/savage binaries are so indubitable for Romana that, when Fiorella is no longer economically profitable to her when they leave Addis

Abeba for Italy at the end of *Kkeywa*, the woman abandons the child as worthless chattel to a long series of temporary foster homes which comprises a great part of the narration of *La nemesi della rossa*. In the latter work, via a historical-legal-psychological reconstruction of her childhood, Fiorella discovers that Romana remains recorded in the Bologna Juvenile Court as her adoptive mother until she reaches the age of majority; as such, the woman collects monetary benefits from the state for years with which she travels and finances remodeling projects instead of providing, even in a minimal way, for her adopted daughter's basic needs.

In order to “survive,” the very word Fiorella adopts, in her new home with her adoptive Italian mother, the nine-year old child learns rapidly to behave as an animal under surveillance, rendering herself invisible, mute, immobile, inexistent, just like “molte prede del regno degli animali” [“many prey of the animal kingdom”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 70) She discovers that she can garner at least ephemeral expressions of approval if she can become “una vera italianina” [“a true little Italian girl”], in short, by remaking herself in the image of the *zia*. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 98) Toward this end, Fiorella ceases to speak Amharic, her native tongue, and renounces lessons in the language at her school which are obligatory for Ethiopian citizens. One of the only ways, besides her work, that allow Fiorella to bask temporarily in the affection of her *zia* is her proficiency in Italian. At the prompting of Romana, who parades the child like a show dog in front of hotel guests, Fiorella demonstrates her bravura in reciting Italian poetry or parroting regional expressions and thereby earns the short-lived praise of the *zia*. Yet the child understands that it is a performance in exchange for a modicum of love: “Pagliaccia per essere amata. Pagliaccia per continuare a esistere.” [“Jester in order to be loved. Jester in order to continue to exist.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 88) Frantz Fanon addressed the obligation of the black Other to become, to “perform” the

colonizer, especially linguistically, in order to be regarded as a “true human being” in his chapter entitled “The Negro and Language” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952):

(I) attach a fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language. [...] *to speak is to exist* absolutely for the other. [...] To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such language, but it means of above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization. [...] The problem that we tackle [...] is as follows: the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, *the whiter he gets*—i.e., he will come closer to becoming *a true human being*. (Fanon *Black Skin* 1-2, my emphasis)

It is noteworthy that both Fanon and Macoggi equate speaking the language of the master, thus becoming white and French or Italian in Fiorella’s case, as conferring the possibility “to exist.” However, it merits mention that Fanon’s work was published in 1952, six decades before *Kkeywa* (2011) and *Nemesi* (2012), yet the selfsame colonizer-colonized hierarchies based on race-language-nationality<sup>41</sup> are still very much operative in Macoggi’s autobiographical stories. Just as the black Antillean who strived to be recognized by the white European in 1950s France by his linguistic virtuosity in the colonizer’s tongue, Fiorella, who grows up in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, attempts to liberate herself from the “inferiority complex” assigned *a priori* to all colonized people: one of her few options is to “reject his (her) blackness” and “become whiter” through

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<sup>41</sup> David Theo Goldberg asserts in his *The Racial State* (2002) that “the modern state has always conceived of itself as racially configured” and not only in extreme cases such as Nazi Germany or South Africa. (Goldberg 2) The central argument of Goldberg’s study is that “race is integral to the emergence, development, and transformations of the modern-nation state;” in other words, the fragile and ambiguous notion of race is the central way in which states exercise their power to categorize and hierarchically rank human beings so that they can protect state interests which are completely unrelated to race (economical, political, legal). (Goldberg 4,7) Goldberg argues that race is a “state apparatus,” recalling Foucault, which operates to justify a system of “social exclusion” that marks who belongs and who doesn’t belong, what status these individuals hold, and how citizenship is awarded. (Goldberg 10) He demonstrates that “racialization” of the modern-nation state is a relatively new phenomenon by tracing its historical evolution, beginning with the mythical “voyages of discovery” in the 1500s in which “new” lands were “discovered” and new nations “founded,” through the racial project of the Enlightenment which justified colonial expansionism. (Goldberg 4) Goldberg sustains that migration and miscegenation are *sine qua non* of the history of the human species which refutes the commonly held belief of new “massive migrations” began only after World War II. (Goldberg 15) In the same vein, Macoggi states explicitly in her 2009 Introduction to *Kkeywa* that one of her objectives in writing the novel was to highlight that “le nazioni sono piene di incroci a cominciare dalla nostra.” [“all nations are full of crossbreeding, starting with our own.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 17) She demonstrates in the same Introduction that the *meticcio* race was an invention by fascist law created to exclude certain individuals from protection of the Italian state and to reify Mussolini’s myth of the noble Italian race.



language. (Fanon *Black Skin* 2-3) As Fanon's Negro must perform white/French better than the French, Fiorella must become more white/more Italian than the Italians to earn regard from her *zia*. Yet striving to become "una vera italianina" to earn love and recognition comes at a cost to the child: it necessitates a devaluation, a negation, and an erasure of Fiorella's Ethiopian self, her family of origin, her language, culture, religion, and history. Indeed, Fanon warned of the "shift, a split", the "dislocation, a separation", as it is referred to in another translation, that occurs in the black/non-European man when he adopts the white/European man's language which tacitly affirms the superiority of the European's culture and the inferiority of his own. (Fanon *Black Skin* 9) Fanon likens speaking the French language to an alienating "change of personality," a "phenotypic change" in the black man's being; becoming white/French/Italian signifies an "absolute, definitive mutation" of his identity that will separate him from his own countrymen and from himself and, yet, will never earn the esteem of the colonizer. (Fanon *Black Skin* 3) Fiorella, in fact, experiences this switch of linguistic code as the "ultimo stadio della mia trasformazione progettata dalla zia." ["the last stage in my transformation which was planned by my aunt."] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 88) She accomplishes her own phenotypic change by distancing herself linguistically even from her own connationals: "cominciai a rispondere in italiano [...] a chiunque mi rivolgesse la parola nella lingua locale." ["I began to respond in Italian [...] to whomever spoke to me in the local language."] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 87) Her performance of being Italian, of being the daughter of the white foreigner, is so efficacious (and alienating) that her coworkers in the hotel interpret her new demeanor as renouncement of her own family: a waiter in the hotel where they both work asks her incredulously one day: "Ançi, ənnatəşən mayet atfəlləğim?—Ehi, tu, perché non vuoi vedere tua madre?" ["Hey you, why don't you want to see your mother?"]

(Macoggi *Kkeywa* 95) Fiorella absorbs this accusation as painfully as a physical flogging, yet has no other way to ingratiate herself with the *zia* than mimic like her.

Verbal adroitness is insufficient, nonetheless, for Fiorella to gain the esteem and love of her Italian mother as her inferiority is pre-determined, just as Fanon asserted in *Black Skin, White*

*Masks:*

When I meet a German or a Russian speaking bad French I try to indicate through gestures the information he is asking for, but in doing so I am careful not to forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or engineer back home. Whatever the case, he is a foreigner with different standards. *There is nothing comparable when it comes to the black man. He has no culture, no civilization, and no 'long historical past. [...]* The fact is that *the European has a set idea of the black man.* (Fanon *Black Skin* 17-18, my emphasis)

Notwithstanding Fiorella's linguistic virtuosity, her docility, and her work ethic, the *zia* continuously indoctrinates the child with her foregone valuation of the *habišà*/indigenous as all of the same ilk, including her daughter. As a superior white Italian, Romana concedes the "value" of the Ethiopians in their economic utility, yet, she admonishes Fiorella that the *habišà* must be supervised closely, since they are by nature lazy, lying, thieving, intellectually obtuse: "non erano capaci di far niente" ["they weren't capable of doing anything"]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 85) Merely a child and at the complete mercy of the *zia*, Fiorella has no available discourses, nor anyone who provides a countering viewpoint, and, most importantly, no power which would allow her to reject Romana's presumptions of the inferiority of her own *conterranei*/countrymen, of their quasi-

zoological classification as sub-human.<sup>42</sup> <sup>43</sup>Consequently, the child employs the few measures available to her: stay silent and invisible, “esistere nel mutismo” [“existing in mutism”], work hard without pay and without complaining, and speak Italian well. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 60) Fiorella guarantees her survival by becoming, in Fanon’s words, “a good nigger” (Fanon *Black Skin* 18) which she experiences as speaking the colonizer’s language, staying submissive, performing work that is too undignified for the Italians, and by her “obbedienza incondizionata” [“unconditional obedience”]. (Macoggi *Nemesi*, 61) In short, Fiorella is obliged to conform to the (distorted) image that the *zia*-colonizer has imposed on her because the child is powerless by her subaltern status determined by race, nationality, class, and young age to oppose her.

Romana’s continuous degradation of the indigenous Ethiopians, hence of Fiorella’s person and her family which reflect the mirroring of minimal worth that she reflects toward her adopted daughter, predictably precipitate a crisis in the child who is no longer certain of the reality of her

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<sup>42</sup> The imaginary of the sub-human, animal-like inferiority of the black man promulgated by scientists and physicians did not pass out of favor after its heyday during the European colonial period and Fascism. The notion that “Black is not a man” but the “missing link between the ape and man” persisted for at least a decade afterward the end of World War II in the scientific community and is still very much present currently in certain nationalistic and racist discourses globally.” (Fanon *Black Skin* xiv, 13) As evidence of this, one only has to perform a search of “white supremacist groups” to have appear a plethora of world-wide organizations that hold the supremacy of the white man as the foundation of their ideology. For example, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon quotes a European psychiatrist, Dr. H.L. Gordon, employed in a hospital in Nairobi who claimed in 1943 that: “A highly technical skilled examination of a series of 100 brains of normal natives has found naked eye and microscopic facts indicative of inherent brain inferiority. Quantitatively, the inferiority amounts to 14.8 percent.” (Fanon *Black Skin* 13) In Fanon’s subsequent work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), written a decade after *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon documents that this “systemized negation of the other” based on biological inferiority was still prevalent in the European medical community in the 1950s. (Fanon *Wretched* 182) To cite only one example, Fanon notes that at a 1955 Congress of French-Speaking Psychiatrists and Neurologists held in Brussels, a Professor Porot presented “scientific evidence” for the reduced mental capacity of the “native” as well as the native’s propensity to aggression, lack of moral conscience, and a list of other character weaknesses. Porot declared that: “the North African native whose cortex and reflexes are poorly developed, is a primitive being whose essentially vegetative and instinctive life is primarily governed by the diencephalon,” the reptilian brain; Fanon, a physician and psychiatrist himself, explained that Porot’s claims essentially deprived the Algerian of a cerebral cortex, thereby rendering him subhuman, basically a “lobotomized European.” (Fanon *Wretched* 225-227)

<sup>43</sup> For a reflection on the deleterious impact of “authoritarian regimes” (race, class, and nationality) on Fiorella’s sense of belonging to the Ethiopian community and, thus, her problematic construction of identity, see Teresa Solis, “Meticciano e memoria culturale in *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticciana* di Carla Macoggi” (2012).

past life and the dignity of her own people: “tutto d’un tratto la mia vita passata sembrava messa in discussione da quel che diceva la zia. Lei era una *ferenĝ*, e non aveva motivo per dichiarare il falso quando raccontava quel che sapeva del mondo degli indigeni. [...] Che confusione.” [“all of a sudden, my entire past life was put into doubt by what my aunt was saying. She was a white foreigner, and she had no reason to lie when she told what she knew about the world of the indigenous. [...] What confusion.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 99) Romana accomplishes the conclusive step in fracturing and cancelling Fiorella’s prior identity, and any remnant of self-worth that remains, when she strikes at the most vulnerable and essential core of the child, her (true) mother. To this end, Romana caustically plants seeds of doubts in the Fiorella’s mind about her mother’s dignity, sincerity, and even her love for her: Romana insinuates that *Selamawit* kept her daughter at home with her only when she was supported by the money of the *ferenĝ* Italian officer and then promptly abandoned Fiorella when he died. This assertion seems to be confirmed by the reality of the situation as, indeed, Fiorella is living with the *zia* as her daughter/employee and rarely sees her own mother. At the age of ten, before departing for Italy with Romana at the conclusion of the first work *Kkeywa*, Fiorella sees her mother and siblings for the last time:

Constatai che non soltanto mio fratello, ma anche una nuova bimba aveva il privilegio di stare con la mia mamma, mentre io dovevo stare lì, in quella stanza, in quel luogo dove avevo dovuto lavorare come una piccolo schiava [...] nel tempo sottratto ai miei affetti, allo studio, al gioco, ai miei fratelli. [...] Quella era la mia famiglia, ma a me era negato appartenerele. [...] aumentava la mia paura di non essere mai più né amata né curata dalla mamma, confermata dal fatto che non vivevamo più insieme, che stava nella casa con i suoi due bimbi, i miei fratellini con cui non potevo abitare [...] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 95-96)

[“I verified that not only my brother, but also a new little baby girl had the privilege to stay with my mommy, while I had to stay there, in that (hotel) room, in that place where I had to work like a little slave [...] in the time subtracted from loved ones, from studying, from playing, from my brother and sister [...] That was my family, but I wasn’t allowed to be part of it. [...] my fear was growing that I would never again be loved or taken care of by my mommy, which was confirmed by the fact that we didn’t live together anymore, that she dwelled in a house with her two children, my little brother and sister, with whom I couldn’t live [...]”]

Not comprehending why she must live in a hotel with a white foreigner separated from her mother and knowing that she will soon depart for Italy with Romana, ten-year-old Fiorella lacks the capacity of critical discernment to question Romana's cruel misrepresentation of her mother, nor does she know the fundamental facts of the circumstances that led to her adoption by the Italian woman. In fact, the latter work becomes the motivation for the second novel, *La nemesi della rossa*, which Fiorella recounts from her perspective as a young adult. Romana's denigration of the girl's mother represents veritable emotional abuse: Selamatwit had represented "the entire known universe" to Fiorella for the first nine years of her life and was the most important/only referent on which the child founded her sense of self and worth. Due to Romana's discrediting of the child's natural mother, Fiorella can no longer be sure who, if anyone, loves her and she sadly concludes when she greets her family for the last time at the conclusion of *Kkeywa*: "avevo creduto scioccamente che tutte le mamme fossero buone, ma ora, grazie alla zia, sapevo che la mia non mi amava." ["I had foolishly believed that all mothers were good, but now, thanks to my aunt, I knew that mine didn't love me."] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 87).

In a chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* significantly entitled "The Black Man and Psychopathology," Fanon predicted the ego-dystonic reaction<sup>44</sup> that Fiorella suffers owing to the constant humiliation of herself, her family, and fellow compatriots: "A normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world." (Fanon *Black Skin* 122) It is not until he encounters the "white gaze, (that) he (the black

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<sup>44</sup> "Ego-dystonic" is a term introduced by Sigmund Freud in his 1914 essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction". Etymologically, it derives from the Latin "ego" ["I"] and the Greek "dys" ["bad", "abnormal"] and "tonos" ["tone"] or "ikos" ["relating to, resembling"]. "Ego-dystonic" is defined as something that is "experienced to be self-repugnant, alien, discordant, or inconsistent with the total personality." (Colman, Andrew M. *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Web. 25 Mar 2017.) In the context of Macoggi's protagonist, the doubts that are planted in her mind by Romana that her mother doesn't want her nor loves her is ego-dystonic, that is, contrary or alien to Fiorella's concept of self and her relationship with her mother.

man) feels the weight of his melanin.” (Fanon *Black Skin* 128) Through his work as a psychiatrist, Fanon learned that the “virginal” black man, prior to confronting the white gaze, is color “neutral,” that is, is unaware of being black. (Fanon *Black Skin* 140) In support of this assertion, Fanon describes a hallucinatory phenomenon called “autoscopy” in which an individual perceives his body from outside his body; Fanon inquired as to what “color” the patient saw himself when he was detached from his material self; the Antillean individual universally replied: “I was colorless.” As further evidence of the color neutrality of the black man, Fanon refers to the content of school compositions written by Antillean children who demonstrate that they are not aware of being black by their descriptions of their “pink cheeks” when they play outdoors. Lastly, Fanon affirms that Antillean women do not see their own children as “black,” but as gradations of light to dark, describing their children as “the least white,” “dark”, “the darkest” (Fanon *Black Skin* 140-141) Fanon’s assertions are confirmed by Fiorella’s experience who had never conceived of herself as *meticcica* or “black,” in the sense of ugly/different/inferior, until she was subjected to the gaze of Romana. She knew that she was the child of an Ethiopian woman and an Italian *fereng* father, but this fact was of no import in the image that her loving parents had always reflected to her: she was a *bellissima bambina*, a valued child, as her idyllic memories of her annual birthday party verify. This explains why the disdainful, degrading gaze of the Italians with whom Fiorella comes into contact provokes an identity crisis in her: the world as she had understood/perceived it, including the worthiness of herself, her mother, and her loved ones, is turned topsy-turvy. Indeed, Fanon holds that contact with the white man represents veritable “psychic trauma” for the black child, and since this trauma is repeated and continuous, it will result in “collapse of the ego” in the black child as it does in Fiorella. (Fanon *Black Skin* 122, 132). Fanon explicitly treats Lacan’s mirror stage theory in relation to the “inferiority complex” of the black man in a lengthy footnote in *Black*

*Skin, White Masks*. He argues that the white man's gaze, due to his "Negrophobia,"<sup>45</sup> deconstructs and reduces the black man from human being to a mere "bodily image", to his epidermis, to a "non ego." (Fanon *Black Skin* 139) Dehumanization via the white gaze results in the loss of the racial other's subjecthood, thus laying the foundation for the black man's perennial quest to be seen, to be recognized by the other. Fanon quotes Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* to define in what this recognition consists: "Self-consciousness exists *in itself* and *for itself*, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness: that is to say, it *is* only by being acknowledged or recognized." (Fanon 191, Fanon's emphasis) Therefore, the black man doesn't exist as an ego, as an independent consciousness, since he is reduced to "thinghood" by the white colonizer; thus, the racialized other's desire to be recognized by the oppressor will be frustrated and frustrating and will "remain the focus of his actions" and determine the "meaning of his life" (or lack thereof). (Fanon *Black Skin* 191, 193)

Kelly Oliver, a philosopher with interests in social and political questions, considers further the mechanism via which the white gaze causes Fanon's postulated "collapse of the ego" in the black individual. In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001), Oliver argues that the racialized other undergoes a "reversed mirror stage." Recalling Lacan, typically (or, ideally), the Lacanian mirror stage permits the child to "establish a relation between the organism and its reality [...] between the *Innenwelt* ["inner world"] and the *Umwelt* ["outer world"]. (Lacan 4). As Oliver explains: "Lacan postulates that the specular I—the I of the mirror stage—sets up the social I." (Oliver 30)

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<sup>45</sup> In a lengthy exposition on the origins of "Negrophobia," Fanon links it to the biological and sexual image that the white man has of the black man: according to Fanon, the white man fears the "corporeality" of the black man, seeing him as a dangerous, potent animal. To support this claim, Fanon cites a study in which he and a group of psychiatrists conducted free association tests on 500 white European individuals (from France, Germany, England, and Italy). The subjects were given a random list of twenty terms, one of which was Negro, and told to liberally supply the first words that came to mind. 60% of white Europeans, in response to the prompt "Negro," replied: biological, sex, strong, athletic, powerful, boxer, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Senegalese infantrymen, savage, animal, devil, sin.

Nonetheless, Lacan held that the child simultaneously experiences his identity as “alienating,” as “split,” in that he is aware that the fragmented, partial image in the mirror does not represent his ego/Ideal I, therefore, the child learns that what seems to be real cannot be trusted. (Lacan 5) He posits that the alienation rooted in the split ego will manifest itself in hostility and aggressiveness in social relationships. Oliver underlines that the alienating ego as described by Lacan is internal to the individual psyche, but argues that the racialized Other experiences an ulterior alienation, what she calls a “double alienation,” which is external to the individual and has its origins in the racist social-political reality:

The pathological mirror of racism has the opposite effect of the Lacanian mirror. Rather than produce the ego with its agency as a fictional defense against alienation, the alienation in the racist mirror destroys the ego. While the Lacanian mirror stage creates a fictional identification that compensates for fragmentation and powerlessness, the racist mirror binds the black subject to an egoless body that is fragmented and powerless. [...] (citing Fanon:) In the mirror of white domination the black body is not reflected as whole or an active agent but as “animal,” “bad,” “mean,” “ugly,” and not human. In the reversed mirror stage, racism, through epidermalization, reduces the ego to skin, not even a fragmented body. (Oliver 32-33)

Thus, the racialized other is assigned *a priori* to a monolithic group identity by the white gaze that is denigrating and dehumanizing; as Fanon asserts: “I am not given a second chance. I am overdetermined by the outside.” (Fanon *Black Skin* 95) Yet, paradoxically, the oppressed must seek recognition, is obliged to seek his subjectivity in the same gaze that decides his “meaningless” in advance.

The negation of the personhood of the racialized Other as theorized by Fanon and Oliver is well represented in the experience of the Ethiopian-Italian protagonist of Macoggi’s two fictionalized memoirs. If one took into consideration only the first work, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* which concludes when Fiorella departs for Italy at age ten with Romana, the events of the narration could be dismissed as an atypical, unfortunate anecdote of child abuse and exploitation on the part of a mad woman, therefore, one could make the argument that colonizer-



colonized racial hierarchies are incidental to the story. In short, ignoring race, nationality, and class, one could make a case that Romana is a disturbed sociopathic individual, incapable of empathizing with others due to her own tortured past,<sup>46</sup> which would explain why she harmed profoundly a helpless child by irrevocably separating her from her mother and loved ones, kidnapping her, and then abandoning her in a foreign country. Even today, racist attitudes and even violence are often explained away in this manner: as episodic, unusual, and isolated, and/or as perpetrated by pathological or extremist individuals. A prevalent discourse holds that we live in a “color-blind” social-political reality given that the current historical moment, as well as that of the 1970s and 1980s when Macoggi’s narrations are situated, is postcolonial, post-slavery, post-civil rights, being the age of affirmative action and gender equality. Thus, racist acts are reduced to an individual problem, as “personality traits or character flaws” as Oliver suggests, rather than a collective cultural and political question rooted in centuries’ old racial dichotomies. (Oliver 161) Oliver addresses the faulty logic in “color blind theory”, which she dismisses as “utopian,” as the “conflation of ought and is:”

Whether or not color is ‘seen’, it produces socially and psychically significant affects in relation to race and political effects. [...] the rhetoric of a color-blind society covers over and perpetuates current social injustice. Even if we accept that we ought to have a color-blind society, that doesn’t mean that we have one now. (Oliver 158-159)

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<sup>46</sup> In fact, Romana had suffered a significant trauma during her own childhood which helps to explain her bitterness and lack of empathy towards others: one day, Romana recounts to Fiorella the terrifying story of how her parents were burned alive in front of her eyes in a pit of lime while she was still a child. Yet while the *zia* tells the story, “non versò una lacrima [...] Sembrava una storia che non la riguardasse.” [“she didn’t shed a tear [...] It seemed like a story that didn’t concern her.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 82) In a radio interview, Macoggi states that she included Romana’s tragic story in *Kkeywa* because she herself “felt pity” towards Romana and was even able to empathize with her, even though the woman had caused her to suffer greatly. Yet, the journalist that interviews Macoggi remarked that the abuse and exploitation that Macoggi had endured at the hands of her *zia* had not rendered the author insensitive, like Romana, who wounds others because she herself had suffered. Macoggi agreed with this statement and stated that her own trauma was, instead, a source of sensitivity towards others which she hoped to maintain. (Macoggi Radio interview *n.d.* lestradedibabele.it)

As Fiorella's story documents, the racial Other's lived experience demonstrates that the "material" effects of the colonizer-colonized dialectic are still very present in the daily reality of the racially otherized individual. The fact that a white Italian boarding house proprietor could intimidate an Ethiopian woman to relinquish her parental rights to her own child and then exploit the little girl to work as free labor in her hotel and, subsequently, abandon the ten-year old child to a series of temporary caregivers in another country without receiving any criminal or bureaucratic repercussions would be unimaginable in a white-to-white, European-to-European, hegemonic race-to-hegemonic race adoption context. Yet, this is precisely what occurred to Fiorella, and the author herself,<sup>47</sup> and Romana seems to have faced no legal consequences and, in fact, she profited from the transaction. Michelle Wright addresses the "materialist" and the "idealist" dialectics that the racial Other must continually negotiate in her *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004). On the one hand, the "material" aspect of race refers to the daily consequences/the lived experience that being marked as the "inferior race" comports; in other words, the "materiality" of race is the reality of "what is" in Oliver's terms. Wright refers to the materialistic dialectic of race as what is felt/experienced by "subjects within Western regimes and cultures that view and act on them as Other." (Wright 17) As distinct from the material, lived reality of the racial Other, Wright identifies the "idealistic dialectics" of race as

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<sup>47</sup> In two undated radiophonic programs on "Le strade di Babele" (a probable date range would be between 2012 when *Nemesi* was published and 2013 when the author committed suicide), Carla Macoggi is interviewed regarding the recent publication of her works, *Kkeywa* and *Nemesi*. It is clear from the discourse between the journalist and Macoggi that both narratives consist of the latter's personal stories: the journalist repetitiously refers to "your story," "your testimony," and Macoggi confirms that *Kkeywa* and *Nemesi* are her personal "memoirs," as she calls them. In the second radio interview, the central argument is the loss of her mother due to her forced migration in Italy and the continuing suffering that it provokes in her, a pain that she never surmounted as evidenced by the journalist's last question: "Tu ti senti ormai fuori dalla tua pena oppure l'esperienza dovrà essere ancora fonte della scrittura?" Macoggi: "(ride) lo penso di scrivere ancora." [Journalist: "Do you feel that you are now beyond your suffering or that your experience will still be the source of your writing?" Macoggi: "(laughs) I think that I will still write (about it)."] The recorded interviews are available online at [lestradedibabele.it](http://lestradedibabele.it) and are signaled by Macoggi's name.

the underlying “racist discourse [...] that produces them as Other” that is, the underlying narratives that create the Black Other. (Wright 17) In her analysis of the “ideal” of race, Wright demonstrates that “blackness” is nebulous, having no distinguishing characteristic or commonality that distinguishes it from “whiteness” other than power: “Black” is a marginalizing category that has no “particular national, cultural and linguistic border.”<sup>48</sup> (Wright 4) Put succinctly, Wright theorizes “Black” as “a signifier for the complex negotiation between dominant and minority cultures that all peoples of African descent in the West [...] must make in order to survive, whether physically or psychologically.” (Wright 25-26) Thus, “Black” is an imaginary, negating identity which is involuntarily conferred on the racialized Other by hegemonic groups, an identity which is suffered nevertheless on the black individual’s skin.

Carla Macoggi’s narratives engage profoundly with both the materialist and idealist dialectics of *meticcio*. In her 2009 Introduction to *Kkeywa*, Macoggi addresses directly the idealistic dialectic of the *meticcio* race. Graduated in jurisprudence from the University of Bologna, Macoggi traces the history of the fascist legislation which produced a veritable invention of the *meticcio* race, as describes it, a constructed “casta di... esseri anormali... esseri disgraziati” [“cast of... abnormal beings... unfortunate beings”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 14-15) Consonant with

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<sup>48</sup> The first chapter of Wright’s *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (204) provides an *excursus* of the various idealist rhetorics that produced the European Black Other and the American Black Other, a brief overview of which is included in note #34 of this chapter. Wright interrogates the invention of race primarily through an examination of the discourses of Hegel, de Gobineau, and Thomas Jefferson which produced the Black Other. This is followed by an analysis of the counter-discourses of DuBois, Césaire, Fanon, and Senghor which Wright critiques as well since they speak of the Black as only “he” in the context of the nation-state, ignoring the possibility of the Black female as well as accepting the “nationalist myth of discretely bound racial groups in which Black subjects produce only Black subjects and white subjects produce only white subjects.” (Wright 12) Wright’s study is important in exposing the contradictions among the various conceptualizations of “Blackness” and how that the “lack of cohesion” among the various theorizations of Black demonstrates their fundamental fiction. She exposes the “personal agendas and beliefs rather than any sort of objective criteria” which underlie them, revealing that race is, indeed, a social-historical-political construct (Wright 64). Moreover, she proposes the “Black mother” as a model which subverts patriarchal discourses, as well as nationalist framing of subjects which will be explored later in this chapter. (Wright 12)

Wright's thesis that racial categories are politically motivated and inherently inconsistent, Macoggi's brief analysis of the laws regarding *meticciato* ["interbreeding between individuals of different races"] demonstrates the evolution of these laws which were altered according to the particular social-political ideology and objectives: Macoggi highlights that racial laws were based on ambiguous criteria (depending on the time frame considered: anthropological, cultural, linguistic, paternal recognition) and changed continually depending on the specific political motivations under which they were enacted. She argues that legislation that criminalized marriages and cohabitation in interracial couples and categorically negated citizenship to their *meticci* children was, in point of fact, a "strumento di potere" ["an instrument of power"] utilized to realize Mussolini's obsession of reestablishing the Roman Republic. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 18) In addition to enacting legislation to discipline relationships between colonizer and colonized and denying citizenship and other rights to their children, the Duce adopted propaganda as one of the arms in his campaign to reify the "prestigio della razza" ["prestige of the (Italian) race"]: articles to promote "Italian racism," as it was denominated, were published in major newspapers,<sup>49</sup> and a bimonthly magazine, *La difesa della razza* (1938-1943), promulgated to the public the ideology

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<sup>49</sup> An important example of Mussolini's racist propaganda campaign via the national newspapers is the cover page article in *La Stampa*, 9 Jan 1937 written by Alessandro Lessona, then Minister of the Italian Colonies, entitled "Politica di razza" ["Politics of race"]. The piece refers to a colonial conference held the previous July in Trieste: under the directive of Mussolini, the conference aimed to address the "problem of race" with the objective to "prevent the rise of a populace of *meticci*." The article blames the "vile consequences" of the birth of "at least 3,500 mixed-race children" on the "centuries' long indulgence of promiscuity" on the part of the Spanish, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and British in the African colonies. Lessona claims that "everyone agrees that the *meticciato* is a painful scourge" and that the rise of this "abnormal branch of the human family" must be prevented. The Minister declares the necessity for a "surgical intervention to save an organism who is threatened by infection," that is, he justifies the change in legislation which negated the possibility for *meticci* children to obtain Italian citizenship in order to maintain the "health and the integrity of the Italian race." He cautions against "excessive sentimentality" which would call for responsibility in the regards of the children born to Italian fathers in the colonies. He reiterates three bedrock points of Mussolini's racist campaign: 1. "clear and absolute separation of the two (Italian and African) races" 2. "collaboration (with the colonized) without promiscuity" 3. "humanity in the consideration of past errors" 4. "relentless severity towards future errors." Lessona concludes by exhorting the populace to honor the noble ancestry of the Romans which they have inherited and which must be protected by not mixing their blood with "inferior races." (my translation)

of the purity of the Italian race. In the fascist media campaign, mixed-race marriages were legally codified as illegal and biologically framed as “abominable,” as a contamination of the concocted Italian-Aryan race, and their offspring as monstrous “bastards.”<sup>50</sup> In Macoggi’s exposition of the

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<sup>50</sup> A *bona fide* public propaganda campaign was implemented under Mussolini’s dictatorship to reify the notion of the purity of the Italian Aryan race. One of the arms of this crusade was the publication and diffusion of the magazine *La difesa della razza* [“The defense of the (Italian) race”]. The inaugural edition was published August 5, 1938 and there were 117 total issues, released on the fifth and twentieth of every month, until the last edition on June 20, 1943. On the frontispiece of the inaugural issue, the ten precepts of “*razzismo italiano*” [“Italian racism”] were laid out explicitly: 1. “Le razze umane esistono” [“Human races exist”] which declares that human races are rooted in distinctive hereditary, physiological, and psychological traits. 2. “Esistono grandi razze e piccole razze” [“Great and minor races exist”] which argues the existence of minor subcategories of the more collective races, such as “the Mediterraneans” and the “Nordic” peoples. 3. “Il concetto di razza è concetto puramente biologico” [“The concept of race is purely biological”] which claims that, while admitting that the concept of race is also based on linguistic, historical, and cultural notions, there is a fundamentally distinct “racial constitution” among different races that render some of them superior to others. 4. “La popolazione dell’Italia attuale è di origine ariana e la sua civiltà è ariana” [“The current Italian population is of Aryan origins and its civilization is also Aryan”], a supposition which links the Italian peoples to those of other European peoples. 5. “È una leggenda l’apporto di masse ingenti di uomini in tempi storici” [“The contribution of huge masses of men in the past is a myth”]: in this section, it is claimed that there has been no significant change in the “racial composition” of Italians in the last millennium. 6. “Esiste ormai un pura ‘razza italiana’” [“By now, there exists a pure ‘Italian race’”]: here, the “group of Fascist university scholars,” as they declare themselves, claim that the “Italian race” is not founded in historical-linguistic abstractions, nor biological ones, but in “purissima parentela di sangue [...] da millenni” [“extremely pure kinship of blood [...] for millennia”] and that this pure blood/race confers nobility on the Italian race. 7. “È tempo che gli italiani si proclamino francamente razzisti” [“it is time that the Italians proclaim themselves frankly racist”] makes clear that a fundamental component of the Regime’s (Mussolini’s) political program had always been the biological notion of the Italian race which is distinguished by “psychological and physical” traits which are similar to the European races, specifically, the Aryan-Nordic races, and decisively different from the extra-European races. 8. “È necessario fare una netta distinzione tra i mediterranei d’Europa (occidentali) da una parte, gli orientali e gli africani dall’altra” [“It is necessary to make a clear distinction between the Western Mediterraneans of Europe, and those who come from Eastern Europe and the Africans on the other hand”] (original parenthesis) which argues that it is “dangerous” and “absolutely inadmissible” to consider that the Italian race has African, Semitic, or Camitic/Hamitic origins. 9. “Gli ebrei non appartengono alla razza italiana” [“The Jews are not part of the Italian race”] which makes a distinction between Semitic and Arab peoples which, when they occupied Sicily, were quickly assimilated so that they left “no trace” of themselves, and the Hebrews/Jews, being of an “extra-European racial element,” are never able to integrate in Italian society. 10. “I caratteri fisici e psicologici puramente europei degli italiani non devono essere alterati in nessun modo” [“The purely European physical and psychological traits of the Italians must never be altered in any way”]: here, a distinction is made between acceptable couplings between individuals of European races which is referred to as *ibridismo*/hybridism and, on the other hand, *incrocio*/crossbreeding which has a negative connotation and references matings between Italians and an individual of a non-European race, peoples which are separated by “thousands of years of civilization”. (*La difesa della razza* 1) In addition to establishing the “prestige of the Italian race,” a major objective of the magazine was to demonstrate the “tragic consequences” of interbreeding between Italians/other Aryans and Africans. The first issues of *La difesa della razza* has an article dedicated to “I bastardi” which gives a pseudoscientific case study of the unfortunate outcomes of matings between Europeans and other races considered inferior (Chinese, Moroccan, Tibetan); the article includes sensational photographs of the “brutti bastardi” [“ugly bastards”] born to mixed-race couplings, including the “Hottentot Venus,” a sort of monster-woman with mammoth-sized buttocks who was the offspring of a Dutchman and a member of the South African tribe Boscimani. The author concludes by saying that he/she hopes that these examples “invite the Italians to think” before entering into a rapport with an extra-European. (*La difesa della razza* 16-17). A great preponderance of the

legislation which invented the *meticcio* race in the Italian context in the Introduction to *Kkeywa*, she adopts a countering viewpoint; she argues that the *meticcio* condition, which results from couplings between individuals of various nationalities and “races,” is inherent to the history of man, and she pointedly cites Europe and Italy as exemplary cases. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 13). For example, she observes that the term “European Union” is an oxymoron, an artificial construct existing only since 1993, which in reality consists of peoples with widely disparate histories, cultures, languages, and nationalities. Macoggi aptly describes the so-called European Union as a “vero mosaico di popoli” [“true mosaic of peoples”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 12), not a “union” of like peoples in any sense. Further, she notes the irony and injustice in the fact that European nationals are granted fundamental human rights which are denied to only “a part of humanity,” namely that part of humanity which is framed as extra-European, frequently a racialized category: specifically, Macoggi addresses the right of free circulation, of migration, and of working and settling where one sees fit in Europe which is denied to “extra-Europeans,” recalling the racist language in *La difesa della razza*. Macoggi asserts, instead, that the laws which allow liberal migration of Europeans demonstrate a general belief in *meticcio* with the stipulation that the “mixture” is among races which are equally hegemonic. Focusing even more on the Italian context, the author observes that Italy itself is a hybrid, composite (non) state dismantling the fascist myth of a coherent, pure Italian race and nation. Using the rhetoric figure of hyperbole, Macoggi underscores the great linguistic, culinary, and historical differences that can be found among Italian communities, even those that are very nearby geographically:

Personalmente considero meticcio anche l’incontro tra italiani di comuni diversi, senza dover arrivare a considerazioni di tipo regionale...la distanza delle due cittadine (Ferrara e Imola) dal capoluogo (Bologna) è di appena trenta-quaranta chilometri, distanza sufficiente

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installments of *La difesa della razza* has at least one similar, scare-tactic article which displays the “disastrous effects” of *meticcio*.

per arricchirsi di nuovi accenti, di diverse abitudini alimentari, di un recente passato per niente condiviso. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 12, my insertions)

[“Personally, I also consider hybridism the encounter between Italians of different municipalities, without having to arrive at considerations at the regional level...the distance of two small towns (Ferrara and Imola) from the regional capital (Bologna) is barely thirty-forty kilometers, yet is a sufficient distance to be enriched with different accents, diverse dietary habits, and a recent past that is not shared in any way.”]

Via her verification of the recent fabrication of the European Union as well as the Bel Paese itself, Macoggi debunks the myth of both the EU and Italy as inherently cohesive entities formed by peoples with significant communalities in terms of race, language, and the nebulous “culture.” In doing so, she exposes the arbitrary disparity in human rights conferred to those who are defined as belonging to the nation/the union, the “citizen” which is often racially-based, and those who are defined as outside-the-nation, as the “stranger”/“non-citizen.” Yet, these imaginary distinctions, “ideals” in Wright’s words, comport nevertheless substantial political, social, and legal ramifications, the “materialist” effects of race, nationality, and gender to use Wright’s terminology, for those who are marked as not belonging, as Macoggi’s protagonist Fiorella and her mother.

Regarding the idealist dialectics of the *meticcio* race that Macoggi exposes in her Introduction to *Kkeywa*, the pages of her narratives reveal as well the underlying beliefs and discourses which reproduce the imaginary of the “mixed breed individual.” The “ideal/intrinsic truths” that the white Italians hold towards the *meticci* children in Macoggi’s fictionalized memoirs are reflected in their attitudes and behavior toward Fiorella and, in turn, result in real material consequences for her, much of which are psychoaffective in nature. From Fiorella’s first encounter with (white Italian) Romana in *Kkeywa*, the nine-year old girl is confronted with the notion that the *meticci* are seen as ugly and dirty: recalling her first evening at the *zia*’s hotel-home, the nine-year old girl is stripped naked and bathed with a blond boy who, spurred on by Romana, derides Fiorella’s darker

skin and how it makes her different from him which is, by definition, repelling and inferior to his own complexion. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 63-64). The same narrative of darker skin equating to physical unattractiveness is repeated when Fiorella returns from a vacation to the lake with her school friend: she is excited to share the details of her trip with the *zia* who has no interest in her adventure beyond reproaching her for exposing herself to the sun: “come sei *brutta*, così *bruciata*, così *nera*” [“how *ugly* you are, how *burnt*, how *black*”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 80, author’s emphasis). In the second text, *La nemesi della rossa* in which Fiorella is passed from one temporary home to another when she is abandoned in Italy at age ten by Romana, the child is rejected as well by her first guardians because of their presumption that, being “African,” she was dirty and infested with insects. The four months spent in the home of Terza, Romana’s sister-in-law, represent one of the few positive memories that Fiorella recounts of her childhood after her adoption: she integrates well into the family who initially treats her like her own daughter. Fiorella is ecstatic, naively believing herself to be the sister of the couple’s daughter and to have finally found a family after losing her own in Addis Abeba: “Avevo quindi un nome, una famiglia, degli amici, un letto, cibo e acqua in abbondanza.” [“Therefore, I had a name, a family, friends, a bed, and food and water in abundance.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 33) However, when her “sister” contracts head lice at school, Terza immediately blames Fiorella, equating Africa/ns with louse infestation: “In Africa, c’erano i pidocchi. Lei arriva dall’Africa.” [“In Africa, there were lice. She (Fiorella) comes from Africa.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 33) Incredibly, Terza and her husband send Fiorella back to Ethiopia to Romana, like a defective pet/toy that they don’t want anymore, even though Fiorella implores them to not send her away. The child is heartbroken that her “family” doesn’t want her anymore and she waits for months for them to send for her. Finally, when she never sees or hears from them again, she must sadly acknowledge that she was “dimenticata sulla luna” [“forgotton on the moon”].



(Macoggi *Nemesi* 36) With great anguish, Fiorella sees her “sister” by chance many years later on the streets of Bologna, the girl with whom she had shared a bedroom for months and who had told her that she loved her, yet the girl “mi squadra da testa si piedi e fa finta di non conoscermi. Finge di non avermi mai conosciuta.” [“she looks me up and down and pretends she doesn’t know me. She pretends that she has never known me.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 34)

Another colonial archetype by which Fiorella is framed is that of the lascivious, African black female. In early adolescence, as previously mentioned, this first occurs when Fiorella suffers sexual abuse at age twelve at the hands of one of the *zia*’s lovers who sees no harm in exploring the buttocks of a (black) child in the plain view of onlookers in a swimming pool. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 36-37). At sixteen-years old, she is sent away by another family with whom she lives for four years, ironically enough a religiously devout couple, because the wife accuses her of causing problems between her and her husband: “da quando ci sei tu noi discutiamo e litighiamo molto.” [“Since when you are here, we (my husband and I) bicker and argue a lot.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 66) Moreover, during a period in which Fiorella is deposited by Romana in a convent, the nuns themselves take salacious delight in spreading false rumors to the other girls that Fiorella is lesbian, which earns her a notoriety that follows her until adulthood and which results in multiple invitations to “kinky” sex parties. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 71) Yet, paradoxically, none of her caregivers/guardians instruct Fiorella as to what constitutes normal, healthy development of female sexuality: the day that Fiorella receives her first menstrual cycle, Romana explains none of the biology linked to the event nor how to care for herself. Instead, she admonishes the girl, telling her that from now on all men are “devils” and she must stay far away from them. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 83) Similarly, the nuns in the convent pronounce that menstruation is dirty, that the female body is shameful, and “se qualcosa, non so esattamente cosa, fosse accaduto, certo la colpa era della

donna” [“if something had happened, I don’t know exactly what, it was certainly the fault of the woman”]. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 47) On the one hand, Fiorella’s dark body is imbued with the persistent colonial imaginary of the hypersexual black African Venus which provokes unwelcome advances and inaccurate presumptions of her sexual availability. On the other hand, she is not provided with appropriate education regarding normal bodily functions or the fundamentals of sexual development and behavior, which resulted in her “(in)educazione sessuale” [“sexual (non)education”] in her words. Consequently, Fiorella avoids clothing and behavior that would confirm the stereotypes which are applied to her, remaining a *verginella*/little virgin, as later her university friends mock her, and being ignorant of what constitutes a normal rapport between a man and a woman. Having internalized the admonitions of the nuns, Fiorella protects her dignity by cloaking her budding sexuality, “mi rendevo amorfa e indistinta. Per non avere colpe.” [“I made myself amorphous and indistinct. To not be guilty.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 47) Thus, her approach to her own sexuality--“Il Super io c’era e comandava alla grande” [“My Super-ego was present and commanded brilliantly”]--was founded on that of the convent sisters as they were her only female role models during a critical period of her development: in short, sex was a shameful sin and the female body was guilty *a priori* and to be scorned. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 77)

Another underlying “ideal”/archetype of the racial Other to which Fiorella is subjected with material consequences on her identity is that of the exploitable Black worker/African slave who is fit only for humble tasks. The master-slave dialectic is first exercised by Romana who abuses Fiorella as child labor in her restaurant-boarding house in Addis Abeba as previously described. The expected servitude that Fiorella suffers at the hands of the *zia* is not an anomaly and, in fact, constitutes the norm in her relationships with her multiple Italian foster parents, including the nuns in her convent stays, so much so that a chapter of Macoggi’s second text is satirically entitled “I

numeri della vita” [“The Numbers of Life”]. Told from the perspective of the now-adult protagonist, Fiorella reflects sadly in *La nemesi della rossa* on how her various Italian guardians located her intrinsic worth not in her personhood, but in her economic utility as free/cheap labor. To cite just a few examples, Fiorella was expected to provide free babysitting services for all of the families that she lived with, again at the expense of her own studies and time for childhood friendships; while living in the convent, the nuns routinely hired Fiorella out for various jobs, some of which put her into peril; for instance, the nuns knowingly sent Fiorella, still an adolescent, to serve as a caregiver to a woman who was addicted to Valium and Roipnol, a strong sedative also known as the street drug “Bruno,” which led to the child taking them herself. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 69, 70). As another display of their Christian charity,<sup>51</sup> the miserly *suorine* [“little sisters”] kept

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<sup>51</sup> Religion would be a rich topic to explore in Macoggi’s two novels. Fiorella’s family of origin in Ethiopia is profoundly religious, yet the child begins to question the benevolence of the divine upon the death of her father and the loss and turmoil that it provokes in her family: “qualcuno che non avevo mai visto voleva sconvolgere l’immobilità del mio cielo e modificare l’ordine naturale delle cose” [“someone whom I had never seen wanted to disturb the stability of my sky/world and alter the natural order of things”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 40). The theme of religious hypocrisy is particularly prevalent in her second work, *La nemesi della rossa*, and is perhaps explanatory for the protagonist’s self-professed atheism. Fiorella’s contact with insincere and even cruel individuals who claim to be religious faithful occurs in two contexts: her time living with Catholic nuns in an orphanage/convent, and the years spent with a fanatical family in Bologna who belonged to a cult called “the association.” In regard to the nuns, they are painted in a dismal light: one nun has a fixation for cheap soap operas and another for horror films which they oblige the adolescent Fiorella to watch with them, frightening her, exposing her to sexual content prematurely, and depriving her of hours of sleep on school nights; sarcastically, the protagonist describes the convent not as a sanctuary of prayer, piety, and good deeds, but as the “domain of television.” (Macoggi *Nemesi* 72) Moreover, the sisters provide an extreme view of sexuality to the girls in the care mainly via scare tactics and guilt instead of education as already discussed. (*Nemesi* 47) Yet, hypocritically, they send Fiorella to live with and work for a twenty-eight-year old man one summer, not concerning themselves if she will be at risk for sexual abuse. In addition, the nuns don’t ensure that Fiorella goes to school and don’t follow her academically but are more concerned that she earns her keep. Regarding “the association,” Fiorella lives for two years with a couple, Lucrezia and Gregorio, who are followers of a religious organization bordering on a cult with rigid rules of conduct which they impose on Fiorella as well. The most ironic and sad commentary on the Christian love that they demonstrate to Fiorella is when they show her no mercy when she is homeless at twenty-four years old. Having not eaten for days, Fiorella begs her former guardians for a bed and a plate of pasta, but instead Lucrezia tells her to “pray, pray to the Madonna and you will see that you’ll feel better. Convert and pray.” (*Nemesi* 82). Instead of showing her compassion, Lucrezia and Gregorio commit Fiorella to a psychiatric hospital, coldly observing in front of her that “it also happens to Negros (nervous breakdowns),” as if the psyche of Blacks/*meticci* were less complex than that of whites/Italians. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 87) A similar presentation of the convents’ economic exploitation of *meticci* children and the lack of benevolence shown towards them is presented in Erminia Dell’Oro’s *L’abbandono* (1991) which takes place in Italy’s colonial period in Eritrea, thirty years prior to Macoggi’s narrations.

detailed spreadsheets on Fiorella's earnings from which they immediately subtracted all of her living expenses so that, in the end, they pocketed the money for her work:

A loro (le suore) io consegno le seimila lire. Servono per quaderni, tessera del bus, mutande, pigiama, assorbenti tutti i mesi...si scrive tutto in un quaderno. [...] Cifre a sinistra e a destra. Per le suore la mia vita sono quei numeri. Nessuna parola d'affetto, nessun incoraggiamento. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 69)

[“To them (the nuns) I turn over six-thousand lire. They need them for notebooks, bus tickets, underwear, pajamas, sanitary napkins every month...they write everything down in a notebook. [...] Numbers to the left and to the right. For the sisters, my life is those numbers. Not a word of affection, no encouragement.”]

Related to the representation of the racially marginalized Other as fit for only humble, manual labor is the minimal importance that Fiorella's Italian guardians place on her education, demonstrating that they do not consider her a child who merits even a nominal investment in her development and intellectual growth. In clear contrast, Selamawit had always told her daughter that “il mio unico dovere era studiare per scuola e scrivere in bella grafia i duecento-novantasei simboli del *fidel*.” [“my only duty was to study for school and write nicely the 296 symbols of the *fidel* (the syllabic, Amharic alphabet)”. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 47, author's italics) Instead, Fiorella's schooling was a minor concern, if one at all, for her Italian caregivers who were more interested in how her work could provide economic benefit to themselves, either through babysitting, hiring her out for odd jobs, or the monthly checks they collected from the State for “caring” for her as she discovers later, and which financed their home remodeling projects and outright purchases of property. Consonant with the “ideal” of the racial Other as worker/slave, therefore, ill-suited for scholarly pursuits, Romana never sustains Fiorella's academic achievements, either monetarily or with her moral support, neither do the nuns nor her other guardians. Yet, the scholastic environment is one of the few “mirrors” in Macoggi's narratives that affirm Fiorella's self-image. As a young child, she raptly describes school as: “per me rappresentava per eccellenza il luogo del

sapere, dell'amicizia, del gioco, dell'ordine armonico, e perciò della salvezza” [“for me, it represented the place of knowledge *par excellence*, the place of friendship, of play, of harmonic order, and, therefore, the place of salvation”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 41) The protagonist's employment of the term *salvezza*/salvation linked via metonymy to school indicates the importance of education in “saving” Fiorella's life/sense of self. *Salvare* derives from the late Latin *salvare/salvus* which confers the idea of *difendere*/to defend and/or *trarre da pericolo*/to be removed from a grave danger or harm. The Italians who care for Fiorella, as their surrogate child nonetheless, demonstrate little to no regard for her personhood; instead, they subject her to and are the source of many perils, physical and psychological. One of the few means by which Fiorella can (at least partially) safeguard/*salvare* her sense of dignity is in academic pursuits. The simile of school/salvation found in *Kkeywa*, is retained and transmuted in the subsequent text, *La nemesi della rossa*, in which the protagonist expresses frequently the metaphor of study as existence, that is, the satisfaction and affirmation that she obtains via intellectual pursuits bestows the possibility for her to “exist” which has been denied to her by the adults who are theoretically caring for her. For example, during her university years, Fiorella exuberantly extolls “la gioia di studiare a tutte le ore. Libertà di esistere.” [“the joy of studying at all hours. Freedom to exist.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 74) Therefore, school “saves” her and intellectual endeavors allow her “to exist,” thus “to be,” since it is evident that she doesn't exist as a worthy child/adolescent in the regard of her white Italian caregivers other than in the possible services that she can provide to them.

The underlying beliefs/archetypes held by the Italians in regard to the racial Other, *meticcia* in Fiorella's case--namely, that she is not white nor Italian, therefore, she is inferior, ugly, dirty, hypersexual, exploitable, fit to be only an underpaid worker/slave, undeserving of education--are all interrelated in that they are founded on the same construct of the racialized Object, the

epidermalized “egoless body” as theorized by Fanon. Patricia Williams, scholar of race theory in the legal context, defines “objectification” in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) as being deprived of the ability to act, as an imposed grammatical re-positioning from subject to object: “I use the word ‘objectify’ in the literal, grammatical sense of subject-verb-object: the removing of oneself from the subject position of power, control, and direction of the verb-action.” (Williams 89) In a similar vein, the prose-poetry of Jamaica Kincaid<sup>52</sup> which opens Michelle Wright’s *Becoming Black* characterizes the loss of subjectivity experienced by the Black individual as the loss of “I”. Kincaid perceives her “blackness” as a separate entity, a cumbersome identity that she cannot escape and which erases her ego, her “I”:

(my blackness) fills up a small room, a large field, my own being [...] the blackness cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside it [...] The blackness is not my blood, but it flows through my veins. The blackness enters my many-tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish: in this way I am annihilated and my form becomes formless and I am absorbed into a vastness of free-flowing matter. In the blackness, then, I have been erased. I can no longer say my name. I can no longer point to myself and say “I.” (Kincaid cited in Wright 2, my insertion)

The annihilating identity of Black/*meticcia*<sup>53</sup> is confirmed by the protagonist’s experience in Macoggi’s narratives *Kkeywa* and *Nemesi* which constitutes the materialist effects of race as postulated by Wright: Fiorella is indeed acted upon as an “object” in a great majority of her

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<sup>52</sup> Michelle Wright opens her *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004) with a “prose poem” of Jamaica Kincaid’s collection of short stories entitled *At the Bottom of the River* (1992). The poet’s quoted description of “blackness” is a point of departure for Wright’s exposition of Black as an identity ascribed with a “complex series of contradictions [...] in the West.” (Wright 2) Kincaid’s poem reveals the hyperessentialist identity that is imposed on individuals defined as Black, an identity that ignores the “intimidating array of different historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences” of the Black diaspora in the West. (Wright 2-3)

<sup>53</sup> Black may be used as a signifier for *meticcia* as well since both are essentializing racial terms which refer to non-hegemonic groups. Wright troubles the conceptualization of races as “discretely bound racial groups” in which “Black subjects produce only Black subjects and white subjects produce only white subjects.” (Wright 12). Her trope of the Black mother reveals the inherent fallacy of the “nationalist myth” of definitively, clear-cut racial categories, as in fact Macoggi’s stories demonstrate: Fiorella is the fruit of a black Ethiopian mother and a white Italian father yet her experience verifies that the *meticcia* is imbued with the annihilating Black identity and confers none of the privilege of her whiteness.

encounters with white Italian individuals. Consonant with the loss of I, the deprivation of subjecthood theorized by Williams and Kincaid, Fiorella is denied even a voice, her obligatory “mutism” being a frequent trope in the texts (*Nemesi* 58, 60, 67). Moreover, Fiorella’s desires (to see her natural family, to play dates with school friends, to study, to not be sent to live in a convent) and even her physical and psychological well-being are dismissed as inconsequential, if they are considered at all: “i miei dispiaceri [...] non erano degni di nota [...] (essendo indigena) la mia esperienza personale non aveva alcun valore.” [“my displeasures [...] weren’t noteworthy. [...] (being indigenous) my personal experience had no value.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 83, 87, my insertion)

In addition to the marginalization conferred by race, black feminist philosopher Michelle Wright argues that gender is another fundamental element of objectification. She claims that Blackness, as an essentializing, nullifying identity, “cannot be [...] produced in isolation from gender and sexuality.” (Wright 4-5) Wright observes that the Black female is erased even in the counter-discourses of intellectuals of African descent, namely, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. DuBois and Léopold Sédar Senghor:

(they) speak of the Black subject only as ‘he’ and allocate to that subject full agency, leaving little room for (and even less discussion of) the Black female subject. [...] Black women, when they do appear in these texts, are background objects and therefore are placed even lower than the white female, who is at least granted some agency.” (Wright 11, author’s aside)

Adopting and extending Wright’s conceptualization of the signifier “white” to include not only race, but also gender, nationality, and class, in the case of Fiorella, her subjecthood is extirpated many times over by the “white gaze” mirror: she is marginalized as black/*meticcia*, female, a child, without property or economic means of her own, and African/extra-European immigrant. In nearly all categories of dialectical subjectivity, Fiorella’s identity is devalued. The definitive confirmation

of the erasure of her subjecthood/humanity occurs when she completes her university degree and, consequently, is no longer eligible for state support nor is she considered the legal ward of anyone. After her graduation, she is abandoned by everyone--“Via da tutti.” [“Away from everyone.”] (*Nemesi* 72) She continually finds herself on the brink of homelessness, yet neither Romana, who remains recorded in the court as her adoptive “mother,” nor the sisters in the convent, nor any of her previous guardians respond to Fiorella’s pleas for the basic necessities to maintain life, namely housing and food. Thus, they reveal their total devaluation of her life: she may as well die. The second novel, *La nemesi della rossa*, concludes when twenty-four-year-old Fiorella hasn’t eaten for days, has nowhere to go and, after appealing unsuccessfully to Romana, she begs two former guardians to whom she felt particularly close for “a bed and a plate of pasta.” Lucrezia and Gregorio, who espouse to be devout followers of a religious sect of Catholicism, advise Fiorella to “prega, prega tanto alla Madonna e vedrai che starai meglio. Convertiti e prega.” [“pray, pray a lot to the Madonna and you will see that you’ll feel better. Convert yourself and pray.”] (*Macoggi Nemesi* 82) Instead of showing her Christian compassion, they commit Fiorella to a psychiatric hospital, coldly commenting in her presence that “Allora succede anche ai ne...” [“Well then, it (nervous breakdowns) also happens to Ne(gros)...”], as if the psyche of Blacks/*meticci* were different, less complex, less vulnerable, than that of whites/Italians. (*Macoggi Nemesi* 87) Lucrezia and Gregorio abandon Fiorella to recover in the hospital alone while they go on their planned vacation, oblivious to the irony in the fact that they registered themselves in the hospital as her “family members of reference.” (*Macoggi Nemesi* 87).

*La nemesi della rossa* has an ambiguous conclusion: Fiorella is twenty-four years old, graduated in law from one of the most prestigious universities in Italy, yet she is alienated from her family in Ethiopia as well as her Italian “mother,” homeless, hungry, penniless, and



involuntarily committed to a psychiatric ward, diagnosed with “reactive psychosis:” “bloccata in una cassaforte impossibile da aprire dall’interno” [“captive in a safe that is impossible to open from the inside”]. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 87) The story finishes enigmatically with a dream which consists of a fantasy trial, entitled “Tragedia in mezzo atto ” [“Tragedy in a half act”]. Poet, writer, and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi appears in the role of attorney and convokes Romana, Lucrezia, Gregorio, various nuns, among other former guardians of Fiorella, and unsparingly confronts these “*tru sew*”/“brava gente” [“good people”] of their crimes against a child. The “brava gente ” faced with their crimes in the fantasy courtroom trial at the conclusion of Macoggi’s autobiographical stories is a clear reference to the myth of the Italians as “good colonizers” in Africa: these modern-day 1970s and 1980s Italian colonizers denied a child of her mother, siblings, and extended family, exploited, abused, and neglected her, and universally abandoned her when she was no longer economically useful or when they rejected her for what they saw as the “defects” of her race. The poet/lawyer Leopardi addresses them one by one, stating their crimes, refuting their flimsy explanations for their wrongdoing and, in the end, condemns all of them: “posso dirle che lei ha fatto una grande porcata, come tutti gli altri qui presenti?” [“may I tell you that you committed a dirty trick, like everyone else else present here?”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 95) Fiorella’s utopian conclusion to the dream trial is that she, the plaintiff, shoots her offenders point-blank in the face with a pistol and escapes to Valencia. Yet, unlike her racist abusers, she is filled with guilt and remorse: ““Tu ria’ sono io.” [“‘You’re wicked’ that’s me.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 95) To her credit, Fiorella’s nightmare/fantasized revenge concludes differently: Leopardi reaches her in Spain and reassures her that the *brava gente* are still alive, yet he admonishes Fiorella to seek another solution to the wrongdoing she has suffered: “niente violenza, bastano le parole. Bastano le parole e tu, tu sei finalmente libera ” [“no violence, words suffice. Words are enough and you,

you are finally free”]. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 96) It is, in fact, by means of the word, by recording her story, that Fiorella attempts to heal herself and to reconstruct an identity which has been fragmented and erased, in which her very person has been annihilated by individuals in hegemonic positions who claimed to love and care for her. Yet the ambiguous conclusion of *La nemesi della rossa* demonstrates that justice and healing from politically-induced pathology are elusive for Fiorella: the fact that she can accuse those who have harmed her, some of which are veritable crimes, only in a dream with the aid of a dead Italian poet confirms the reified idealist (imaginary identities) and materialist (real, material consequences) dialectics of race theorized by Michelle Wright: Fiorella, finds herself in the “real world” of a black, female, Ethiopian-Italy *meticcia* living in Italy where she is and will remain reduced to her epidermis, not in a dream world where justice is served and poets can save her from her abusers. In her reality lived in 1970s and 1980s Italy, Fiorella can never extricate herself from the white gaze/the distorted mirror of race and she will remain trapped in the material, lived consequences of it. As a final confirmation of this inescapable reality, *Nemesi* concludes with a telephone call from Lucrezia and Gregorio, the guardians with whom she had the closest relationship. When Fiorella is dismissed from the hospital, Gregorio calls her to cruelly inform her: “Noi non siamo la tua famiglia, ricordatelo bene.” [“We aren’t your family, make sure you remember that.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 97) Unable/unwilling to see Fiorella as a human being who has suffered greatly, and at their hands nonetheless, they demonstrate no compassion to her and offer her no assistance; in short, they make it clear to her that they don’t care if she lives or dies. The narration closes inconclusively when Fiorella decides: “Tutto pesa come un macigno. Incapsulare la pietra in una nuvola per renderla lieve è il segreto.” [“Everything weighs (on me) like a boulder. Encapsulate the stone in a cloud to make it light, that is the secret.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 97, my insertion) To render the weight, the pain of her story bearable,

Fiorella/Macoggi records it in the form of a two-part memoir, to bear witness to what she endured and to create an alternate identity for herself so that she may heal and move on. The author refers explicitly to herself in the first person in her 2011 Introduction to *Kkeywa* and declares:

Mettere la parola “fine” a avventure di qualsiasi natura è assai difficile. D'altronde la terra è destinata a un moto perpetuo e tutto segue questo movimento, adeguandosi. Questo racconto non può fare diversamente, ed è giunto il momento di separarsene con una chiusura e un impegno a lungo termine, alla ricerca di un altro inizio, una rinascita essenziale e decisiva. Vorrei avere il maggior numero possibile di critici, lettori e persone che mi agevolino il “voltare pagina.”...(altrimenti) Come faccio a salvarmi?” (Macoggi Introduction *Kkeywa* 20-21, author’s quotation marks, my insertion)

[“Placing the word ‘the end’ at the end of ordeals of whatever nature is rather difficult. On the other hand, the earth is destined for perpetual motion and everything follows that motion, adapting oneself to it. This tale cannot do otherwise, and the moment has arrived to separate oneself from it with a closure and a long-term commitment, in the search for another beginning, an essential and decisive rebirth. I would like to have the greatest number of critics, readers, and persons who will support me in ‘turning the page.’...(otherwise) how will I save myself?”]

Here, the author expresses her desire and goal that completing the narration of Fiorella’s *racconto*/story will allow herself to move on with her life and, significantly, to experience a metaphysical and psychological *rinascita*/rebirth, implying that the act of recording the vicissitudes of Fiorella’s denigration by her Italian guardians, will detach her, the author, from the bulky, weighty black identity which was imposed by them on her and her protagonist. The author attempts to heal/escape from her blackness via recording her fictionalized memoirs, “autobiographical tales” as she refers to them in the second work, thus, (re)creating the affirming, positive identity which was mirrored to her by her natural (Black Ethiopian) mother.

#### IV. QUESTIONS OF LITERARY GENRE: THE INVERTED *BILDUNGSROMAN* AND FICTIONALIZED MEMOIR AS WITNESSING TO CREATE SUBJECTIVITY

Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001) adopts the metaphor of vision as synonymous with racial hegemony. She distinguishes between “seers”/subjects and “seen”/objects

as a useful way to frame the power disparity in racial binaries: the active “seers” regard the passive “seen” with a gaze that “considers only his own interests and maintains a willful ignorance about the subject positions of those he watches, therefore, the seen is “reduced to an object of spectacle, there for the viewer’s pleasure, possessed by the subject’s gaze.” (Oliver 156-157) Adapting an expression from Patricia Williams, Oliver likens the unidirectional, voyeuristic gaze to which the seer subjects the seen as a “pornographic seeing of race.” (Oliver 156) The gaze is one-way since the seen is not permitted to view the seer in return as the former “is not subject enough to look.” (Oliver 157) Typically, the gaze of the seer results in “bad visibility” for the seen, akin to the “epidermalization,” the reduction to skin, of the black Other by the white gaze described by Fanon which pre-determines his/her meaningless and the homogenizing, essentializing identity of Blacks in the West described by Wright. According to Oliver, bad visibility can take two forms: “hypervisibility” which implies “exaggerated seeing,” being spotlighted or rendered a spectacle, and “invisibility” which means being deprived of “visage,” “becoming a faceless object,” in short, one’s needs and even existence are inconsequential because one has no value. (Oliver 149) Oliver’s vision/power metaphor is particularly exegetical in the case of Macoggi’s narratives: Fiorella is hypervisible in that the hue of her skin and her *meticcia* racial status signify her as other/stranger-foreigner/slave/hypersexual, in her own words, a “piccolo giocattolo esotico” [“a little exotic toy”] to be passed around from guardian to guardian when they tire of her or no longer have use for her. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 31-32) On the other hand, Fiorella is also invisible in that she is sub-human/insignificant/disposable/powerless. From her first encounter with Romana at age nine, Fiorella understands that she will have the role of a hired hand like all of the other *habisa* [“indigenous”] in her *zia*’s employ, thus, she will not be viewed as the woman’s adopted daughter; as mentioned previously, the child protagonist realizes quickly: “non credo che mi considerasse

una bambina.” [“I don’t believe that she considered me a little girl.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 75) An additional consequence of her “bad visibility” is that Fiorella is not permitted to see the seers nor should she dare to ask to be seen herself. The few times that she reaches out in desperation to her Italian surrogate parents (Romana, Lucrezia and Gregorio, the nuns) for help, they deny the significance of her requests, even the most basilar of needs such as food and housing, the lowest requisites for human existence on Maslow’s hierarchy, those of “physiological needs” and “safety.” Her guardians even chastise Fiorella for daring to ask them for assistance, calling her “foolish,” a “sinner,” and even “insane.” (Macoggi *Nemesi* 75, 81, 87)

In lieu of hypervisibility and/or invisibility, Oliver argues that the racialized Other seeks “good visibility:” that is, the recognition and the power that derives from being seen/being regarded as a subject. She defines good visibility as recognition of one’s individuality but also as being viewed as belonging to a group not framed in “stereotype(s) [...] a group with a social presence and importance.” (Oliver 149) Oliver frames recognition as a “nonhierarchical” form of love, which “restores agency” to the other and which confers “response-ability,” the power to respond to others. (Oliver 206, 217) Yet the scholar acknowledges that the racialized other’s desire for recognition is, in fact, a “symptom of the pathology of oppression.” (Oliver 169) That is, being aware of one’s own otherness and having to recourse to those in dominant positions to obtain subjectivity verifies the reality of power binaries and, in fact, reifies these dichotomies. As demonstrated by the equivocal, open ending of both of Macoggi’s autobiographical stories, Fiorella’s entreaty for subject status remains an impossibility or, at best, an improbability: *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* concludes with a hysterical, inconsolable ten-year old Fiorella who departs for Italy with Romana, never to see her natural mother again, and *La nemesi della rossa* finishes with the protagonist’s commitment to a psychiatric hospital. In the 2011 introduction to *Kkeywa*, Macoggi

explicitly declares her own positionality<sup>54</sup> devoid of hegemony in the context of the “paese cattolico” [“Catholic country”] in which she lives: “(io) donna...in quanto meticcica, emigrata,

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<sup>54</sup> Carla Macoggi’s own standpoint is fundamental in providing a painfully accurate portrayal of the condition of the *meticcica* in 1970s and 1980s Italy. To the best of my knowledge, besides Macoggi’s *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011) and *La nemesi della rossa* (2012), the only other postcolonial narrative work dedicated in great part to a consideration of *meticcio* in the Italian context is Erminia Dell’Oro’s *L’abbandono: Una storia eritrea* [*The Abandonment: An Eritrean Story*] (1991). Macoggi’s works differ in important ways from Dell’Oro’s novel which I would argue is dependent on the two authors’ widely divergent positionalities. Macoggi writes from the standpoint of the Other as defined by race, gender, religion, social class, and nationality. As she states in the Introduction to *Kkeywa*, Macoggi identifies as “meticcica, emigrata, immigrata, atea [...] sono collocata negli ultimi gradini della scala sociale, a guardare dal basso verso l’alto” [“mixed race, emigrant, immigrant, atheist [...] I am situated on the lowest rung of the social ladder, looking up from the bottom”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 20) Even though Macoggi’s two narratives are situated in the 1970s Ethiopia and Italy, thirty years after the conclusion of Italy’s colonial adventure in Africa, the various protagonists of her two works can be readily divided into colonizer/colonized roles due to the power differential between them (in terms of race, nationality, and class), and they remain decisively in those positions until the conclusion of the story. The historical moment in which *Kkeywa* and *Nemesi* are collocated is significant in that it testifies to the reification and persistence of the Hegelian dialectics of race and nationality in the so-called “postcolonial” period. Instead, Dell’Oro, while highly sympathetic to the plight of the colonized as her works for both children and adults attest, identifies herself and her family as “Italian” even though she spent her first twenty years in Asmara and her parents and brother still live in Eritrea where they have always resided. (see: Ghezzi, Marta. “Erminia Dell’Oro: Così racconto nelle scuole i piccoli migranti” 2014) In the preceding journalistic interview, Dell’Oro chronicles her family’s origins which resulted in her literary activity as well as her decades-long social commitment to recount the travails of the racialized other in the Italian colonial context. Briefly, Dell’Oro was born in Asmara to Italian parents. It was her grandfather, a furniture maker, who left Lecco, Italy in 1895 to seek his fortune in the Belgian Congo and somehow ended up in Asmara “by mistake,” as she says. Even though Dell’Oro was born and spent her most formative years in Eritrea, it is revealing to note that her self-concept is decisively Italian, not Eritrean, and not even Eritrean-Italian. It seems significant that Dell’Oro spent more of her formative years in Africa than Macoggi, but she strongly identifies as Italian which reveals the rigidity of the construct of race being irrevocably bound to nationality. Another distinction in the positionalities of the two authors is their families’ affiliation with the power positions of “colonizer” or “colonized:” Dell’Oro’s family was in Eritrea as part of Italy’s colonizing mission there, but Macoggi revealed in a conference presentation in 2010 that members of her family, her grandparents and great-grandparents, had been enslaved by the colonizers. (Macoggi “Parola chiave”) Consequently, the divergent positionalities of Macoggi and Dell’Oro are revealed in their approaches to narrating the condition of a *meticcica* child. For example, Dell’Oro’s novel is recounted from an “outsider’s” objective perspective in the form of third-person fictitious narrative; moreover, the novel is collocated during Italy’s colonial period in Eritrea and concludes with a “happy ending” which implies that that unfortunate part of history is concluded. Instead, Macoggi’s two works are told from the first-person point of view and take place thirty years afterwards making it evident that race and nationality are still causal in oppression of the racial other. *L’abbandono*, Dell’Oro’s novel, tells of a twelve-year old Eritrean girl, Sellass, who is seduced by an Italian man, Carlo, who has come to build railroads in Massaua after a failed attempt to seek his fortune in America. Sellass bears Carlo’s two *meticci* children and, shortly thereafter, both she and the children are abandoned by him, in part due to racial laws which criminalized sexual/familial relations between Italians and the natives of the colonies, and in part because of Carlo’s own weak character as demonstrated by the fact that he never seeks his children even after he is released from prison. Sellass and her children undergo years of great difficulty, both financially and socially. Nevertheless, differently than Macoggi’s stories, Dell’Oro’s novel concludes with a “happy ending” in that Marianna, Sellass’ daughter, achieves her dream of emigrating to Italy where she marries an Italian and has two daughters of her own, one of whom becomes a physician. The conclusion of Dell’Oro’s novel makes clear that Italy represents a destination, a quasi-Paradise, the mythical West in which Marianna is able to fulfill her bourgeois dream of security, financial well-being, and education after years of marginal survival in Eritrea. Nonetheless, *L’abbandono* does not have a fairy-tale conclusion: Marianna remains estranged

immigrata, atea, [...] sono collocata...negli ultimi gradini della scala sociale, a guardare dal basso verso l'alto, l'infinito, ancora alla ricerca di arte e parte.” [(I) a woman...in as much a mixed-race, emigrant, immigrant, atheist, [...] I am situated...on the last rungs of the social ladder, looking from below toward high, toward the infinite, still searching for an identity.”] (Macoggi Introduction *Kkeywa* 20, my insertion) It is clear from Macoggi's quote that “Catholic country” is a synecdoche for the multiple power dichotomies by which she is marginalized in Italy, not only religion, but those of race, nationality, gender, and class. As the conclusions of *Kkeywa* and *Nemesi*

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from her mother and brother who are left behind in Africa; her mother dies an embittered, solitary individual who never overcomes being deserted by Carlo and left to raise two children alone in poverty, and Marianna's brother is psychologically fragile and lives in a fantasy world. In clear contrast, the *meticcio* protagonist of Macoggi's cycle of two sequential novels ends up quite differently from that of Dell'Oro's, which confers a much less favorable depiction of the myth of the West. *Nemesi* concludes with a homeless protagonist who is recovering from a psychotic breakdown in a psychiatric hospital in Bologna. Even though Fiorella has been hard-working, obedient and has even earned a prestigious university degree despite her circumstances, she is abandoned physically, emotionally, and financially by her guardian and her former caregivers which led to her nervous collapse and uncertain future. While Dell'Oro's novel is clearly critical of *meticcio* legislation and condemns the unjust, hard fates of abandoned *meticcio* children as does Macoggi's two works, the latter's “autobiographical tales” reflect her own positionality being much more personal, psychological, and introspective in nature. In addition, the author herself, in the form of a meta-narrator, is very present in both works. Macoggi/the meta-narrator frames *Nemesi* as an “autobiographical tale” and makes clear that she is writing from her own personal experience and for therapeutic reasons. In the Introduction to *Kkeywa*, the author acknowledges that the novel has a “personalissimo sguardo” [“extremely personal viewpoint”], as well as the fact that she framed both *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa* as her personal memoirs in the previously mentioned radio interviews. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 19, Macoggi Radio Interview [lestradedibabele.it](http://lestradedibabele.it)) Lastly, History remains very much in the background of Macoggi's two autobiographical stories, unlike Dell'Oro's novel, *L'abbandono*; in fact, Macoggi's observations that her story is linked to History (fascist racial legislation, denial of migration rights to the racialized other) are limited to her introduction to *Kkeywa*. One could surmise that the innocent viewpoint of a child in *Kkeywa* renders historical events incomprehensible and, therefore, only its consequences in the little girl's personal experiences are narrated. However, this would not explain why History is virtually ignored in *Nemesi* as well which is told from thirty-year old Fiorella's viewpoint. A possible clue as to why Macoggi “neglects” History in her two novels can be found in her short story “A Tahaitu piaceva il Fələwəha” (2010): the story is a brief history of Addis Abeba, where Macoggi spent the first ten years of her life, which reviews the political evolution of the city from the period of Italian colonialism to the late Eighties. She reveals injustices and atrocities committed by the various powers in control of the city/Ethiopia at different times, including: the Italian colonists, the Allied Forces, the Ethiopian emperor Haila Sallasse, Mānghastu, the organizer of the agriculture cooperative, and the United States. A decisively cynical commentary on power, there are no “good” leaders, even those among her own compatriots. Instead, “power” is synonymous with “stramberie” [“bizarre acts”] and “capriccio” [“tantrum,” “caprice”] and is merely a question of who is dominant at that time. Universally, the current ruling party/individual is referred to the “in-group” who acts in self-service and causes the populace to suffer: “Il popolo non si arricchì con il cambio di guardia. Anzi.” [“The people didn't get rich with the change of the guard. To the contrary.”] (Macoggi “Tahaitu” 51) For a critical article on Dell'Oro's *L'abbandono*, see Teresa Solis, “Fare intercultura raccontando il meticcio: I casi di Dell'Oro e Ramzanali Fazel” (2012).

reveal, subjectivity will not be conferred on her by those in positions of hegemony, instead, the author realizes that the solution must be found within herself: it will be up to her to “salvarmi” [“save myself”] via writing her memoirs. (Macoggi Introduction *Kkeywa* 21) As Carla Macoggi demonstrates incontrovertibly in the events that occur in her two autobiographical stories, no matter how “worthy” Fiorella strives to be as defined by the adjectives that she adopts in her attempt to gain favor from Romana and the others (intelligent, high-achieving, obedient, industrious, mute, loyal, upstanding, and Italian), she never receives recognition of her intrinsic value as a human being, not from her adoptive “mother” nor from any of the other colonizer/guardians.

Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black* (2004) would argue that it is futile for Fiorella to seek acknowledgment from her substitute Italian parents as it will not be forthcoming. Wright rejects outright the plea for recognition as well as the utility of counter-discourses on the part of the Black other, arguing that beseeching for one’s visibility remains trapped within the power binaries of white/black, male/female, European/African, citizen/alien. Instead, Wright proposes the “Black mother” as a model of “intersubjectivity” for the Black diaspora individual, that is, between mother and child subjecthood is both mutually conferred and mutually affirmed. Deriving inspiration from textual analyses of Carolyn Rodgers<sup>55</sup> and Audre Lorde’s<sup>56</sup> poetry, Wright advocates the paradigm

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<sup>55</sup> Specifically, Wright considers Carolyn Rodgers’ *How I Got Ovah* (1975) as exemplary of a model for intersubjectivity for Black subjects. Rodgers’ collection of poetry consists of dialogues between a Black mother and her daughter. Wright notes that the “archetypal relationship between the narrator, a young black woman, and her mother” is affirming, dialogic, mutually informative, and circular in time, what she calls the “circular mother-daughter chronotope.” (Wright 151, 155). In contrast with the Black other who must plead for recognition by the white subject, a relationship which remains polarized along the power differential of the Hegelian master-slave binary, the Black mother-daughter rapport furnishes a prototype of “complex ‘intersubjects’ (who are) informed by and informing each other through a host of assertions and contradictory meanings.” (Wright 159, my insertion)

<sup>56</sup> Wright refers to Audre Lorde’s collected poems in *Coal* (1970) and *The Black Unicorn* (1978). Wright highlights the significance of Lorde’s positionality in her poetry: “working class, Caribbean, African American, lesbian, mother” which confers on the poet the authority to “address audiences across class, community, and color lines.” (Wright 161-162) In Lorde’s poems, the protagonist is a Black mother who uses her “position to unify Blacks across the



of the Black mother-child relationship as the means via which the Black diaspora subject can achieve subject status. The scholar argues that the “Black mother is the point of orientation for all Black subjects” since the hegemonic “strictly defined borders” of nation, race, and class disappear in the rapport between Black mother and Black/mixed-race/white child. (Wright 178) Wright describes the Black mother-child relationship as dialogic and intersubjective:

In Lorde and Rodgers, this process (encountering others and realizing one’s (inter)subjectivity) begins with the mother, recognizing her as both Other and conflated with oneself. This is reminiscent of the Lacanian mirror stage and the moment when the child realizes s/he is not one with the mother. However, where Lacan then engages a dialectic series of ramifications (the most famous being the phallus and the law of the father), Rodgers and Lorde engage dialogic structures. [...] The trope of the mother enables a more complex realization of circular time, belying the myth of origins as clearly delineated and controlled by founding fathers. The trope of the mother recuperates the history of female achievement erased by Black nationalist ideology and favors a dialogic structure for subjectivity, which in turn enables a truly diasporic structure to produce Black subjects united across national boundaries and united through diversity rather than homogeneity. (Wright 179, author’s aside)

Simply put, as opposed to the alienating mirror of racism which provides a distorted image that annihilates identity in the racial Other, the intersubjective Black mother-child mirror furnishes a reciprocal reflection which consists in “complex intersubjects informed by and informing each other.” (Wright 159) According to Wright, the Black mother and her child are both united by and mutually affirmed by blood/biological bonds, by generational continuity (past, present, and future), by similar positionality (otherness: race, nationality, class, culture), and by history (family history, shared homeland, social-political-historical reality). The erasure that occurs via the hegemonic white gaze (again, “white” with its multitude of signifiers: white race, male, heterosexual,

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communities and national borders, underscoring their links to Africa, to one another, and to Black men (who often appear as sons).” (Wright 162, author’s insertion) Wright conceives of the tropes of time and space in Lorde’s poetry as circular as opposed to the notion of the founding of time and space and the concept of progress/linear time in the ideal of the Western nation-state: “(with the intersubjectivity between Black mother-child) time and space are circular in the material consciousness—the ‘You’ flows into the ‘You’, with the mother and the endless conflation of selves mediating. [...] intersubjectivity is not a simple merging of two into one (the synthesis in an ideal dialectic) but the conflated coexistence of two subjects, defined by, through, and against one another.” (Wright 171, author’s insertion)

European, propertied, class) is expunged in the mother-child rapport. Therefore, recognition for the racialized Other is possible via a dialogic intersubjectivity with the Black mother. Nevertheless, it does not eliminate the materialist dialectics that the individual will face when dealing with subjects in more hegemonic positions, yet the subjectivity conferred by the Black mother-child relationship has the possibility to create and strengthen the ego/the permanent sense of “I” which can serve as a buttress when facing oppression. Fiorella’s case is a clear demonstration of postcolonial pathology: the child protagonist is denied fundamental human rights, those of affiliation with one’s family and those of food, safety, shelter, and education, by her Italian guardians given their hegemonic positions. According to Wright’s model, the Black mother-mixed-race child rapport would have been essential for the foundation and stability of Macoggi’s protagonist self-identity, the privation of which led to a lifetime of psychoaffective consequences, including years of alienation and depression, culminating with dissociation of her personality and involuntary hospitalization in a psychiatry ward.

Indeed, the deprivation of one’s natural mother, Black and Ethiopian in Macoggi’s case which recalls Wright’s Black mother as the unique “point of orientation for all Black subjects,” is palpable, painful, and omnipresent in several of Carla Macoggi’s short stories,<sup>57</sup> radio interviews, and her sequential “autobiographical stories” *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011) and *La nemesi della rossa* (2012), as well as the prior published versions of the latter two works.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See footnotes #10 and #12 in this chapter for a description of *La via per il paradiso* (2004), “Luna” (2009) and “Come uno sciocco mulino a vento” (2009).

<sup>58</sup> Again, the 2004 *La via per il paradiso* was published by Macoggi under the pseudonym Carla Amete Ghebriel di Liberio and is nearly identical to *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011) except that the protagonist is named Carla, not Fiorella as in *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa*. In addition, *La via per il paradiso* includes what appears to be a childhood photograph of the author which is lacking in *Kkeywa*. (Macoggi *Via* 18) Instead, the short story “Come uno sciocco mulino a vento” (2009) was published under the pen name of Carla M. and the plot is similar to *La nemesi della rossa* (2012). In the former work, the narrator explains the significance of the name of the protagonist, Fiorella, as “una piccola pianta sradicata” [“a little uprooted plant”] referring to the trauma of the loss of her mother and her forced immigration to Italy with her adoptive mother. (Macoggi “Mulino” 254) A strange

(Wright 178) Regarding literary genre, the first “novel,” *Kkeywa*, can be conceived of as an inverted or reversed *Bildungsroman*. The canonical *romanzo di formazione* [“coming of age novel”] traces the formative events, experiences, and relationships during childhood that lead to the establishment of an individual’s identity and/or life’s calling. The genre is turned on its head in *Kkeywa*: told from ten-year-old Fiorella’s point of view, the story recounts the fragmentation and dismantling of a child’s identity after her transnational and transracial adoption and subsequent exploitation by a white Italian woman. Up to seven years of age, the little girl had been loved, protected, and valued and affirmed that she was a *bellissima bambina* and had never heard the racial terms *kkeywa*, *melleswa*, *meticcia*, *nera*, *bruciata*, *brutta*, *habisa* applied to herself, nor found it strange or problematic that she had a white Italian father and a black Ethiopian mother. *Kkeywa*, instead of narrating how a child’s character and sense of self are formed through edifying experiences at school, home, and in her social-political community as in a typical *romanzo di formazione*, recounts the deformation of a child’s sense of self through a traumatic separation from her natural mother, a forced immigration to Italy with a new adoptive “mother”/zia, and continual, traumatic subjection to the white gaze mirror which erases her worth. *Kkeywa* concludes with a definitive estrangement from Fiorella’s natural mother, her siblings and other blood relatives, her homeland, language, and past when Romana seizes the little girl as property/labor and immigrates with her to Italy. At the end of the text, when they depart from Addis Abeba on the airplane for Rome, Romana compels Fiorella to declare to immigration authorities: “quella (Selamawit) non è mia madre e i suoi bambini non sono i miei fratelli” [“that woman (Selamawit) isn’t my mother

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continual change of perspective is found in the narration of “Come uno sciocco mulino a vento” which Macoggi wrote as she was recovering from an unspecified mental illness: the point of view vacillates continually between first person *io/I* and *lei/she* as if the narrator is attempting to dissociate herself from the experiences. Alternatively, the unsure point of view could reflect the author’s desire to detach herself from her personal experiences with transnational adoption by framing them as the life of Fiorella instead of her own.

and her children aren't my brothers and sisters"]. (Macoggi *Kkewya* 101) The negation of the existence of her own mother thereby annihilates Fiorella's potential "dialogic and intersubjective" relationship with her natural mother which existed beyond the constructs of nation, race, and class and on which the child could have founded a coherent, positive sense of identity. (Wright 178) *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* concludes with the ten-year-old child's hysterical emotional breakdown that foreshadows the more serious psychotic dissociation that will occur in Fiorella's twenties: on the flight to Italy, Fiorella screams uncontrollably for her mother and issues a guttural cry, a prayer, quoting a poem by Alda Merini as she departs once and for all from her mother and her former life/identity: "Cara mamma, dove sei? Io sono sulle nuvole e ti voglio tanto bene." ["Dear mommy, where are you? I'm up in the clouds and I love you so much."] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 102)

Regarding the literary genre of Macoggi's second text under examination, *La nemesi della rossa*, the critical introduction to the work, entitled "Il colore del memoir" ["The color of memoir"], by Fulvio Pezzarossa is illuminating. In framing Macoggi's *Nemesi*, Pezzarossa employs a variety of terms: "memoir" in three instances, "autofinzione" ["autofiction"], "autobiografia," as well as a "storia di vita" ["life history/story"]. (Pezzarossa 7, 8, 9, 11) He also refers to the text as a "capolavoro mnestico(o)" ["masterpiece of memory"] analogous to works by Italian-American writer Louise De Salvo.<sup>59</sup> (Pezzarossa 9) The adjective "mnestico" ["mnemic"]

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<sup>59</sup> In his critical introductory essay to *La nemesi della rossa*, Pezzarossa compares Macoggi's narrative to De Salvo's *Vertigo: A Memoir* (1996), denominating both of them as "masterpieces of memory" and arguing that both women's memoirs "grondano 'dolore dappertutto'" ["they overflow with 'pain everywhere'"]. (Pezzarossa 9) Certain aspects of De Salvo's autobiography can be favorably compared to Macoggi's two works, namely: the heavy psychological/psycho-pathological content of the stories; the authors' struggles to emerge from a position of marginality and to construct a self-identity in the absence of positive, healthy role models; and the adoption of the pen as an instrument of healing. Nonetheless, significant differences distinguish De Salvo's memoir and positionality from those of Macoggi. First, De Salvo presents herself as a poor, working class, second generation Italian-American with a weighty genetic predisposition to debilitating depression. A prevalent motif in De Salvo's autobiography is the examination of own her propensity to depression in an attempt to avoid the fate of the other women in her family; she accomplishes this, albeit with many setbacks and struggles, via creating an identity for herself as a writer and

seems particularly useful: deriving from the Greek “-*mnēsis*,” it refers to memory as well as the pathological impact of past experiences on the present. The term is frequently employed in medical/psychiatric contexts in relation to disturbances of memory. Indeed, amnesia, an affliction of memory, is a theme confronted in Macoggi’s *La nemesi della rossa*; for example, in the first chapter, an unnamed meta-narrator comments that the tale is a result of Fiorella’s “frugare nel suo passato” [“rummaging around/scrutinizing her past”] since her memories of her suffered childhood seemed nonsensical and fragmented. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 15) Confirming Pezzarossa’s conceptualization of Macoggi’s second work as a memoir, the author herself acknowledges in a

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scholar of English literature. Macoggi’s protagonist, unlike that of De Salvo, is subjected to the inescapable racial aspect of her identity, being *meticcias* in white, Catholic, 1970s Italy. Furthermore, Macoggi’s protagonist, undergoes a significant, traumatic migratory experience which is not the case with DeSalvo: “il mio trauma (ferita con frattura) migratorio” [“my migratory trauma, an injury with fracture”]. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 19, author’s parenthesis) Another prevalent theme in Macoggi’s stories is that of abandonment since her adoptive “mother,” Romana, deserts her to a series of temporary caregivers. Nevertheless, as Pezzarossa claims, a probing of memory to reconstruct an incomprehensible past, an operation which results in significant emotional anguish, is prominent in both author’s works. In DeSalvo’s words: “The story I want to tell is that of how I tried to create (and am still trying to create) a life that was different from the one that was scripted for me by my culture, how, through reading, writing, meaningful work, and psychotherapy, I managed to escape disabling depression. It is the unlikely narrative of how a working-class Italian girl became a critic and writer.” (DeSalvo xvii) In Macoggi’s two narrative works, instead, her objective is not to change her destiny via pursuing an intellectually stimulating career and defining herself as a scholar, even though she was a highly accomplished individual in terms of her education. While these are undeniably anomalous and courageous goals for a young woman of DeSalvo’s socioeconomic status and second generation American in a period before expectations of vocational parity for women, Macoggi’s writings and study instead are aimed at mere survival. In the absence of her mother, her loved ones, her homeland, her mother tongue and any financial security, the protagonist of Macoggi’s two “autobiographical tales” records her story simply to recompose the fragments of an annihilated history and identity. In addition, she declares a political-pedagogic goal to “denounce” the persistent, entrenched “prestigio della razza” [“race prestige”] in 1970s Italy as well as the “contradictory phenomena” of the “legame tra migrazione e meticcias” [“link between migration and mixed-race”]. (*Kkeywa* 12, 13) Thus, the racial component, which is much more in the background in DeSalvo’s memoir, is central in Macoggi’s narration as well as the traumatic experience of migration which is completely absent in the Italian-American writer’s autobiography. The conclusions of the respective writers’ works demonstrate, as well, their disparate goals, one aimed at elevating one’s station in life via a feminist project of career, the other at mere survival: DeSalvo’s story finishes with a “happy ending” in that she achieves her professional and intellectual goals and establishes herself as a scholar and writer of fiction. In contrast, Fiorella’s story, Macoggi’s protagonist, concludes with her involuntary commitment to a psychiatric hospital. The tale concludes with her aspiration to merely find work and a place to live in Bologna, her beloved city. Quoting the lyrics of one of her favored musical groups, Subsonica, Fiorella concludes the narration with her very simple desire to live: “Questo domani solo vivere e accettarmi.” [“This tomorrow, only to live and accept myself.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 97) Thus, DeSalvo and Macoggi’s works are distinct in the significance of race as determining positionality as well as the additional trauma of losing one’s mother via a transnational adoption.

radio interview that *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa* are her personal stories and she even classifies them as her “memoirs.” (Macoggi Radio Interview) Moreover, in the same interview, Macoggi revealed her “sanative” intentions for recording her story: “ero in piena autoanalisi in quel periodo [...] volevo approfittare della funzione terapeutica della scrittura [...] volevo analizzare il mio piccolo mondo.” [“I was in full self-analysis during that period (while she was writing) [...] I wanted to benefit from the therapeutic function of writing [...] I wanted to analyze my little world.”] (Macoggi Radio Interview, my insertion) Macoggi was well aware of the curative effects of narrating one’s own anguishing experiences, having participated in a national literary contest for those who had suffered from a mental illness and who utilized expressive writing to aspire to a psychoaffective rebirth: her short story, “Come uno sciocco mulino a vento” (2009), won the category of *racconto*/short story in the competition. Additionally, in her 2011 introduction to *Kkeywa*, Macoggi expresses openly her hopefulness for the therapeutic value of recording “Fiorella’s” story, as previously mentioned: to “separarsene (dal racconto) con una chiusura e un impegno a lungo termine [...] alla ricerca di un altro inizio, una rinascita essenziale e decisiva.” [“to separate oneself (from the story) with a closure and a long-term commitment [...] in the search for another beginning, a necessary and decisive rebirth.”] (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 20, my insertion) The use of the locution *separarsene* [“separate oneself from”] seems particularly significant if one considers that the author opted to call the protagonist “Fiorella” instead of “Carla” as she was referred to in the first published version of *Kkeywa*, *La via del paradiso* (2004). Similarly, in the same radiophonic interview, Macoggi consistently responds to the journalist’s questions with references to “Fiorella’s” story, instead of “my” story, even after disclosing that the narratives are her memoirs. Perhaps framing the cruelty and dehumanization that the author suffered as “Fiorella’s tale,” instead of her own, was a useful coping mechanism which permitted

Macoggi to dissociate herself from the abuses and trauma that the “protagonist” endured. By relegating Fiorella’s painful experiences to a two-part “autobiographical story” or fictionalized memoir, the author could distance herself from both “the protagonist” and the experiences she suffered, which would allow Macoggi to construct a new identity for herself, no longer rooted in the traumatic past that she had undergone.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the author explains in the interview her motivation for naming the protagonist of her memoirs “Fiorella” [“little flower”] which implies “la possibilità di rinascita, di trasformarsi” [the “possibility for rebirth, to transform oneself”]. (Macoggi Radio Interview) By confining Fiorella to a “fictitious” narrative, Macoggi herself could “voltare pagina” [“close the chapter”] of her own painful childhood, as she explains in the 2011 Introduction to *Kkeywa*, with the objective for “rinascita” [“rebirth”], repeating the same term she adopted in the interview. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 20) By recording her story, perhaps both her protagonist and the author herself would have the possibility to give birth to the “I” that had been fragmented and deformed by the separation from a critical point of reference, her mother, by an involuntary, suffered immigration to Italy, and by the distorted racist mirrors that she had encountered with her various surrogate parents.

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<sup>60</sup> For a critical essay on the employment of the genre of fictionalized autobiography by Italian postcolonial authors as a means to confer subjectivity on oneself that has been denied by the *polis*, see Donata Meneghelli, “Finzione dell’io’ nella letteratura italiana dell’immigrazione” (2006). Meneghelli frames self-fiction by these authors as “l’autobiografia del possibile” [“autobiography of the possible”]: “...con la metamorfosi della ‘persona’ in ‘personaggio,’ la letteratura diventa lo spazio in cui singole soggettività possono finalmente costituirsi...La finzione consente di prendere la parola ed essere ascoltati, grazie alla libertà, all’impunità, insomma ai più ampi margini di manovra che offre il territorio dell’invenzione; soprattutto, consente di prendere la parole liberandosi dei panni forse sempre troppo stretti del testimone, di colui che parla (anche) a nome di qualcun altro, o perché altri non hanno voce.” (Meneghelli 45) [“...with the metamorphosis of the ‘person’ into ‘literary character,’ literature becomes the space in which individual subjectivities can finally be established...Fiction allows one to speak and to be heard, thanks to the freedom, the impunity, in short, to the wider margins of maneuver that the space of invention consents; most of all, (auto-fiction) allows one to speak via liberating oneself from the nearly always too tight constraints of the witness, of s/he who speaks (also) in the name of some else, or because the others don’t have a voice.”]

In regard to the therapeutic value of narration, Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001) claims that the act of telling one's story or bearing witness to one's "subordination, oppression, and subjectification" can be healing. (Oliver 7) Referring to narratives from victims of the Holocaust, of torture, and enslavement, Oliver argues that painful and traumatic memories and experiences must be recalled, reconstructed, and recounted in order to recover from them; in her words, "Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects." (Oliver 7) She highlights that "witnessing" confers power to the otherized individual in two ways: first, by permitting the person who has been objectified to speak to/address the individuals who have harmed her/him, what she calls "address-ability"; and, then, by demanding a response from the oppressor, in the form of retribution or compassion for the injustices suffered which is denoted by Oliver as "response-ability" or the "ability to respond." (Oliver 15) Secondly, not only does giving one's testimony grant a voice which has been previously denied and demand accountability, the act of bearing witness is constitutive in "solidifying the ego:" that is to say, employment of the word, "telling oneself to the other," allows the oppressed individual to construct his own identity/subjectivity without the necessity of recognition from the tyrant. By telling my story, I "give birth to I" without the need for confirmation of such from those who have exploited me via their position of hegemony. (Oliver 206-207) In the specific milieu of Italian postcolonial literature, it has been documented that the racialized, gendered, outside-the-nation Other often adopts the genres of autobiography and memoir, as does Macoggi, to "tell one's story" to others, an act which grants a voice to the silenced, and demands to be seen by the invisible. As Michelle Wright highlights the double erasure of the Black female, described as the "negation of the negation" who disappears even from African counter-discourses, Dagmar Reichardt notes the



double aggression against gender and race, the “doppia subalternità” [“double subordination”], of Italophone female migrant writers with ties to former African colonies. (Reichardt 21) Akin to Oliver’s argument of witnessing as remedial inasmuch as an efficacious means to counteract aggression and violence, Reichardt in his essay, “La presenza subalterna in Italia e la scrittura come terapia” (2013), frames the labor of writing in the context of the racialized, postcolonial “donna subalterna” [“the subaltern woman”]<sup>61</sup> as therapeutic. Akin to the practice in psychiatry of “expressive writing,”<sup>62</sup> “talking back from the periphery,” from a silenced position of non-hegemony, can serve as a “cure” or at least a palliative for a trauma suffered. Yet Reichardt cautions that therapeutic writing does not negate the esthetic intentions and literary value of Italian postcolonial literature. (Reichardt 17, 23)

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<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, Reichardt draws a parallel among the postcolonial writings of migrant female Italian writers and the “ciclo dei vinti” [“cycle of the defeated”], the peasants and laborers, of Verga’s *verismo* literature, the “offesi” [“the offended”] of Vittorini, and “il popolino” [“the common masses”] of Italian neorealist cinema. He proposes Italian postcolonial literature, particularly that of the female gender, as a “nuova corrente creativa prodotta da soggetti emarginati” [“a new creative trend (of literature) produced by emarginated subjects”] who speak of their political and social trauma via literary production similar to *verismo* literature and neorealism. (Reichardt 16-17) An important difference that I would delineate, however, is that Italophone women postcolonial authors write from the same/similar positionality of their protagonists, that is, these authors frequently have lived analogous experiences of the characters in their literary works and are marginalized in the same ways in regards to race, gender, class, nationality, and a traumatic diaspora experience while this is not typically the case in the artists who produced the literary and cinematic genres that Reichardt describes.

<sup>62</sup> Reichardt borrows the term “expressive writing” from Baikie and Wilhelm’s 2005 article “Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing.” A clinical psychologist and psychiatrist, respectively, Baikie and Wilhelm describe their method of “prescribing” three to five sessions of writing on a personal traumatic event for fifteen to twenty minutes per session, an adaptation of the “Pennebaker paradigm” from the homonymous American psychologist. Baikie and Wilhelm present clinical studies in which expressive writing was proven therapeutic, both psychological and psychosomatically, for a wide variety of psychiatric disorders ranging from: trauma and natural disaster survivors, women with body image issues, children of alcoholics, male prisoners with psychiatric diagnoses, and individuals who had experienced a bereavement or a break-up with a significant other. (Baikie and Wilhelm 340) The authors hypothesize about the various mechanisms via which expressive writing is therapeutic, including providing emotional catharsis, which they discount; as a means to “confront previously inhibited emotions,” which is judged to be only partial in its efficacy at best; and, the explanation that they privilege, as a mode of “cognitive processing” which they define as the “development of a coherent narrative (which) helps to reorganize and structure traumatizing traumatic memories.” Providing repeated exposure to traumatic memories via writing them daily may lead to “extinction” of them, but the authors note that the findings are indeterminate in this regard. For an explanation of Pennebaker’s writing paradigm, see his academic homepage at the University of Texas-Austin: <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/psychology/faculty/pennebaker#writing-health>.

In addition to the perhaps psychotherapeutic goals for composing her memoir, it seems that Carla Macoggi conceived of her “autobiographical story” in the Lacanian sense as well, as a means to create her own affirming self-reflection/ego independent of the oppressive white gaze. In support of this hypothesis, Macoggi entitled the first chapter of *La nemesi della rossa*, “Specchio specchio della mia speranza” [“Mirror, mirror of my hope”]. Additionally, the author labels the historical document which precedes *Kkeywa* as “Specchio IV” [“Mirror #4”]: the document is a testimony of Fiorella’s Italian father’s military certificate of valor which serves also as “proof” of her kinship with him. His state-conferred accolade confirms Fiorella’s, his recognized daughter’s, Italianity, thus, her right to be treated with dignity. Furthermore, the narrative voice of *La nemesi della rossa* relates the concepts of “mirror” and “story” as mechanisms via which the protagonist could establish an edifying image of herself, analogous to Oliver’s mirror/power metaphor. On the first page of *Nemesi*, the meta-narrator comments: “Dopo venti anni Fiorella trovò uno specchio. Uno specchio che narrava le gesta di un eroe. Uno specchio che scoprì simile a tanti altri di rientrati dalle colonie.” [“After twenty years, Fiorella found a mirror. A mirror that narrated the deeds of a hero. A mirror that she discovered was similar to many others who had returned from the colonies.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 15) The employment of the locution “rientrato” [“one who has returned”] to describe Fiorella, and others like her, is noteworthy in that it presupposes belonging, implying one who is coming home, returning to the homeland. Importantly, Macoggi did not frame the story/reflection of the protagonist here as “immigrata” or even *meticcia*, but as one of many “rientrati:” this identity confers the political right to take up space and be welcomed as a compatriot in Italy. Furthermore, “rientrato” highlights Fiorella’s historical ties to Italy via the colonial history which she and “tanti altri” [“so many others”] racialized Others share, a term which pushes back against the alienation and marginalization that they must confront when they are categorized as

“immigrati”/“extracomunitari” [“immigrants/non-European illegal immigrants”]. Thus, through framing her memoir by the metaphor “mirror/story”, the protagonist creates her own “mirror” via narration which reflects the merits of a heroine, as she states, not the deformed reflection of the white gaze who regarded her as a mute, black, ugly, meaningless slave and who “deserved” neglect, exploitation, and denial of her humanity.

Nonetheless, one would have to question the efficacy of the “writing cure” in overcoming postcolonial pathology, in this case, the offenses and damage to the ego perpetrated by the distorted racial mirror, at least in Fiorella’s and Macoggi’s examples, when one considers the ambiguous conclusion of *La nemesi della rossa* as well as the heartwrenching early demise of the author herself. In the previously cited radio interview, the journalist poses exactly this question to Macoggi, that is, if she had been healed by recording the injustices she had suffered at the hands of Romana and others: “Tu ti senti ormai fuori dalla tua pena oppure l’esperienza dovrà essere ancora fonte della scrittura?” [“Do you feel that you are now beyond the pain of your experience or will it still be a source of writing?”] Macoggi responds, laughing: “Io penso di scrivere ancora.” [“I think I will still write.”] Even more pointedly, the journalist inquires if one can ever overcome the torment of the separation from one’s mother, to which Macoggi replies: “L’assenza della madre non si può colmare [...] è impossibile.” [“One can never fill the absence of one’s own mother. [...] it’s impossible.”] (Macoggi Radio interview) The author’s responses, pronounced with tremulous emotion, clearly indicate that, even after nine years of narrating “Fiorella’s” story, the trauma of being wrenched from her mother at age nine has left indelible scars.

Even so, it is important to acknowledge that Macoggi was not exclusively motivated by reasons of self-psychoanalysis and self-preservation, in other words, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* and *La nemesi della rossa* cannot be simply categorized as “l’autobiografia selfhelpista” [“self-

help autobiography”] in Reichardt’s words; he notes that much of Italian postcolonial literature has been dismissed as such and, therefore, has been considered to have very little literary value and is thus excluded from the Italian literary canon. (Reichardt 19) Beyond her own hopes for therapeutic narration, in a radio interview Carla Macoggi expressed political aims for her two “autobiographical stories” which was rooted in her altruism towards other marginalized persons, particularly children of color. Via documenting and disseminating her memoirs, the author hoped to save others like herself from a similar fate: “volevo scrivere una storia che non trattasse solo di me [...] è il mio desiderio che ciò che è successo a me non accada agli altri [...] Fiorella ha sofferto per tutti. Basta!” [“I wanted to write a story that didn’t regard only me [...] it is my desire that what happened to me doesn’t happen to others. [...] Fiorella suffered for everyone. Enough!”] (Macoggi Radio interview) Likewise, in the 2009 Introduction to *Kkeywa*, the author draws parallels between her story, colonial History, and the contemporary condition of the racial Other in Italy: specifically, Macoggi pinpoints connections between her life events, which took place in the Seventies and Eighties in Italy, the racist laws and ideology codified and promulgated during fascism and Italian colonialism, and current attitudes and laws towards the racial Other in Italy. Macoggi claims that the abuses she suffered, the appropriation of her very person, demonstrate the decades’ long persistence of colonial racial hierarchies and the modern-day consequences of them:

Ritengo quindi di voler precisare che sono e sono sempre stata del parere che ciò che avvenne negli anni ‘30 fare parte in modo inequivocabile della storia italiana, rappresenta la parte peggiore di quello che accadde in quel periodo e continua ad avere conseguenze “in”-spiegabili nella contemporaneità. (Macoggi Introduction *Kkeywa* 11)

[“Therefore, I wish to point out that I am, and I always was, of the opinion that what happened in the 1930s is an unequivocal part of Italian history, that it represents the worst part of what occurred in that period, and that it continues to have ‘un’-explainable consequences in today’s world.”]

She asserts that her story cannot be dismissed as an isolated, unfortunate anecdote of the exploitation and kidnapping of a mixed-race child by an insane<sup>63</sup> or, at best, a morally reprehensible Italian “colonizer” in 1970s Ethiopia. Instead, the events narrated in *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi* provide a concrete, living example that the colonial practices of subjugation and dehumanization of racialized Others did not cease with the “conclusion” of colonialism. As Paolo Mengozzi, professor of European Union law at the University of Bologna, wrote in his Preface to Macoggi’s *La via per il paradiso* (2004), the first published version of *Kkeywa*: Fiorella’s tale has a “valore che trascende le circostanze di tempo e di luogo” [“value that transcends the circumstances of time and place”] in that it unveils a “cultura impregnata da un’idea di superiorità dei bianchi e del mondo occidentale.” [“culture impregnated with the idea of superiority of the white (race) and the Western world.”] (Mengozzi 5) Mengozzi frames *La via per il paradiso* as a story that speaks of fundamental human rights which are denied to (some) children. Macoggi’s own dedication to *Kkeywa* reveals that she was conscious of and intended to underscore the exemplarity of her life story by framing her “memoirs” as a more universal account similar to that of many other children:

A tutti i bambini costretti  
a crescere in fretta per le guerre  
pensate e messe in atto  
da coloro che hanno dimenticato

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<sup>63</sup> The behavior of Romana toward a helpless child, as well as that of Lucrezia, Gregorio, and the convent nuns, is so bizarre and cruel that it is tempting and even reasonable to frame their treatment of Fiorella as the acts of deranged individuals. In fact, this approach was adopted by Giulia De Gaudi in her critical essay of *La nemesi della rossa*, “Un libro come lettera al mondo” (2013). De Gaudi “diagnoses” Romana with schizoid/borderline personality disorder and labels the other adult protagonists as “malati di mente” (“mentally ill”), “persone profondamente malate” [“profoundly sick persons”]. Referring to Lucrezia and Gregorio who belonged to a sect of the Catholic religion called CL, “Comunione e Liberazione,” De Gaudi frames them as individuals who “usano la religione cattolica come stampella per non cadere nel nulla su cui hanno fondato il loro essere.” [“use the Catholic religion as a crutch to not fall into the void on which they have founded their existence.”] While all of these assertions can be supported if one approaches Fiorella’s story as a microcosm, that is, as an isolated incident, it is a perspective which ignores the social, historical, and political context, that is, the cruel treatment that Fiorella suffered at the hands of Romana, *et.al.* are not bizarre anomalies but rather common occurrences that point to reified racial, gender, and nation-based hierarchies which result in violence against the marginalized Other.

il valore della pace,  
convinti di essere in possesso  
della verità assoluta.

A tutti i bambini costretti  
a separarsi  
dalla loro famiglia di origine,  
a causa della povertà  
e/o all'impossibilità  
per i loro adulti di riferimento  
di viaggiare liberamente,  
per garantirsi la sopravvivenza. (Macoggi Dedication *Kkeywa*)

[“To all the children forced to grow up in a hurry because of wars conceived and carried out by those who had forgotten the value of peace, convinced to be in possession of the absolute truth.

To all children forced to be separated from their families of origin, because of poverty and/or the impossibility for their adults of reference to travel freely, (in order to) to provide for their survival.”]

Via giving her testimony in *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa*, the author proposes herself and the traumas that she suffered as an *exemplum* of the fate of multitudes of other vulnerable children: children who have been divided from their families due to newsworthy, dramatic situations such as war, but also those separated from their loved ones due to commonplace circumstances, yet nonetheless psychologically and socially devastating situations, such as poverty, famine, and differential migration rights. Confirming the universal nature of her texts which extend beyond memoir, in a blog post of August 2011, Macoggi announced the recent publication of *Kkeywa* and explicitly stated her political objectives for the project:

Attraverso le domande, le inquietudini e le esperienze di una bimba, nata dall'unione di una donna etiopica e un uomo italiano, questo libro ci conduce per mano a conoscere l'autentico travaglio interiore al quale sono condannati i bambini privati dei loro diritti e della loro certezza identitaria da una cultura che conserva intatti i pregiudizi coloniali verso le popolazioni africane. [...] Tra le speranze di questo libro, anche quelle che ad altri bambini sia risparmiato quanto è toccata a lei. (Macoggi “Ecco finalmente il mio libro,” *I try to be (a blogger)*, 2 Aug 2011)

[“Through the questions, the anxieties, and the experiences of a little girl, born from the union of an Ethiopian woman and an Italian man, this book takes us by the hand to become

acquainted with the genuine, inner anguish to which children are condemned who have been deprived of their rights and of sureness about their identity by a culture which maintains intact its colonial prejudices towards African populations. [...] Among the hopes of this books is also that of saving other children from what she had to go through.”]

Black feminist author Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black* (2004) denominates this type of literature, that is, literary works in which the Black female diaspora author draws parallels between her personal life and that of her protagonist(s) in order to highlight unifying political values, as “semiautobiographical”: in the fictionalized memoir, the singular is representative of the collective Other who is marginalized by sex, class, race, nationality, and/or a migratory experience. Wright proposes “semiautobiography” as an instrument which can highlight and create commonalities and bonds with other Black women “across time and continents,” an art form which can be identity-confirming, similar to the dialogic intersubjectivity made possible by the Black mother-child relationship which was negated to Fiorella and Carla Macoggi. (Wright 162-163) Wright, in her analysis of Black German women writers, notes that the autobiography has been a “common strategy (of Black diaspora female authors in Europe) [...] the literal writing of oneself into the nation” where the Black body is most often read as African/stranger/outside-the-nation. (Wright 192) The writing of the Black diaspora body into the nation recalls Macoggi’s insistence that Fiorella represents a “rientrato” to Italy, an individual with historical, political, and blood ties to the land and who has the right to belong and be treated with dignity.

In distinguishing between “memoir” and “autobiography,” the journalist in the previously cited radio interview classifies Macoggi’s narratives as the former and the author agrees. The interviewer distinguishes that autobiography is more “tied to the truth” and “must reconstruct events, facts, [...] it requires an objective comparison between reality and writing.” Diversely, the journalist highlights that “emotional truth,” instead of historical accuracy, is primary in the genre

of memoir and is accomplished via poking around in the memories of authentic, lived experiences. Macoggi agrees and explains that the technique of “flashback” allowed her to probe her memories which ultimately resulted in *La nemesi della rossa*: “i flashback mi hanno reso libera di vagare nei miei pensieri e trasformarli in scritti in modo personale.” [“(the use of) flashbacks made me free to wander around in my thoughts and transform them into writing in a personal way.”] (Macoggi Radio interview) The distinction that the radio journalist and the author delineate between the approach and the substance of autobiography and memoir is represented by Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing* (2001) as the two faces of giving testimony to one’s traumatic experiences, namely “juridical” and “psychoanalytic” witnessing, as previously mentioned. In her bivalent conceptualization of witnessing, Oliver clarifies that, in the juridical sense, an eyewitness reports what s/he has “seen with one’s own eyes” by “testify(ing)” and “giv(ing) evidence” like a historian or an attorney who reports the facts of what occurred. (Oliver 16) Indeed, both of Macoggi’s texts, *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa*, present factual evidence just as an attorney would: the stories report precise dates, specific events, names of individuals, as well as the veritable crimes that they committed against Fiorella and *La nemesi* even concludes with an imaginary trial in which all of the “defendants” are summoned and sentenced. Moreover, in keeping with juridical witnessing, both of Macoggi’s narratives are prefaced by verifiable historical documents. For instance, as previously noted, preceding *Kkeywa* is a photocopy of Fiorella’s adoptive father’s Declaration of Military Valor certificate; introducing *La nemesi della rossa* is an official court record, a letter to the Juvenile Court in Bologna which speaks of the guardianship of Fiorella, falsely stating that the child is being cared for by Romana who had instead abandoned the girl in a convent. The accurate reproduction of historical “fact” is important to Fiorella/Macoggi since it permits her to make sense of her life events, to reconstruct her personal history which was nonsensical never having been



explained to her as a child, so that she can interpret it from an adult perspective: “Volendo ricomporre la mia vita così come si ricongiungono le parti di un puzzle” [“wanting to put my life back together like one joins the pieces of a puzzle”]. (Macoggi *Nemesi* 18) Macoggi’s metaphor of reassembling a puzzle, like gathering the evidence for a trial, is significant in that it describes an operation analogous to the mechanism proposed by Baikie and Wilhelm which explains the efficacy of “expressive writing:” namely, the act of recording traumatic experiences allows an individual to construct a “coherent narrative” of these memories and reorganize them in “more adaptive internal schemas” which render them less toxic and anxiety-provoking. (Baikie and Wilhelm 341) The narrative voice in *La nemesi* expresses a very similar motivation for telling her story: “Voglio mettere ordine in questa confusione. Scrivere per eliminare l’imprecisione. Ripensare a tutto per cancellare lo scompiglio. Rimuovere l’incoerenza della vita con le parole.” [“I want to put order in this confusion. Write to eliminate inaccuracy. Remember everything to eliminate disorder. Remove the contradiction of life with words.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 19)

Nevertheless, imagining Macoggi’s memoirs as a factual reproduction of the offenses committed against her and merely as a means to address/speak to those who perpetrated them would be an incomplete and inaccurate representation. Psychoaffective content permeates both *Kkeywa* and *La nemesi della rossa* and corresponds with Kelly Oliver’s “religious/psychoanalytic” conceptualization of “bearing witness [...] to that (which) can’t be seen.” (Oliver 16) In this sense of witnessing, the individual writes not to replicate the facts, but to transmit the “psychoanalytic truth” of one’s personal experiences, a truth which is dependent on one’s particular historical, political, and social circumstances, thus, subjective reality. (Oliver 16) In this regard, Macoggi’s memoirs are not only historical/factual accounts but are significantly colored by “dolore dappertutto” [“pain everywhere”] as Fulvio Pezzarossa describes in his Preface to the second

work. (Pezzarossa 9) Even a cursory analysis of the lexicon that permeates Macoggi's memoir reveals the multiple repetition of terms pregnant with psychoaffective connotation: "dolore" ["pain"], "malinconia" ["melancholy"], "tristeza" ["sadness"], "solitudine" ["loneliness"], "silenzio" ["silence"], "morte" ["death"], "sola e perduta" ["lost and alone"], "sofferenza" ["suffering"], "confusione" ["confusion"], "disordine" ["chaos"], "smarrimento" ["bewilderment"], "annientarmi" ["debase myself"], "adolescenza perduta" ["lost adolescence"], "psicologia disintegrata" ["disintegrated psyche"], "grigio infinito" ["infinite grey"], "ferite con fratture" ["fractured, open wounds"], "piangere per giorni interi" ["to cry for entire days"], "invisibile," "addolorata" ["sorrowful"], spaventata ["frightened"], "mutismo," "paura schiacciante" ["crushing fear"], "blu" ["blue"], "lacerazione mentale" ["mental laceration"], "le lacrime amare" ["bitter tears"], "psicosi reattiva breve" ["brief reactive psychosis"], "mi ero dissociata" ["I dissociated/disintegrated"]. In point of fact, what differentiates Macoggi's narratives from historical and legal texts on the condition of *meticci* children who were abandoned by their Italian fathers in the colonies or even from scholarly critical analyses of their condition is the standpoint of the author: Carla Macoggi's positionality, inasmuch as *meticcina*, female, child, immigrant, poor, and motherless, distinguishes her "autobiographical story" as a form of psychoanalytic witnessing to the lived experience of the gendered, classed, and racialized Other in 1970s and 1980s Italy.

Even though Macoggi is successful in reconstructing her personal history, both in the historical/eyewitness and religious/psychoanalytic significances of witnessing, the narrative is still nonsensical, uninterpretable, unspeakable: there is no satisfactory "explanation" or "sense" that can be made of the abuses she/Fiorella suffered which is confirmed by the equivocal conclusion of *La nemesi della rossa*: the protagonist is in a dissociative fugue state, involuntarily committed

to a psychiatric hospital, and remains voiceless until the end of the tale, unable to confront/respond to her *nemesi*, her abusive Italian surrogate parents, except in a Utopian fantasy/dream. Moreover, it seems important that the author felt it necessary to include a confirmation of the inexplicability of her life story from the hegemonic standpoint of a white Italian male, as if her own self-reporting was inadequate: marked as “Appendice” [“Appendix”] and inserted after the conclusion of *Nemesi* is an email that “Fiorella” received in 2005 from the son of Romana’s lover. “Mario” confirms to the protagonist that: “non vi è nessuna motivazione ‘valida’ che possa giustificare il comportamento scorretto della sig.ra Romana nei tuoi riguardi. Non è altro che pura cattiveria.” [“There is no ‘valid’ justification that could justify the unjust behavior of the signora Romana towards you. It is nothing but pure cruelty/wickedness.”] (Macoggi *Nemesi* 100) The fact that Fiorella felt it necessary to have her story “validated” by a white Italian male and to conclude her “autobiographic tale” in this fashion confirms that Romana and the other contemporary Italian colonizers were successful in dismantling Fiorella’s/the author’s identity, depriving her of her own authority, rendering her incapable to speak even about herself, placing doubt on the efficacy of fictionalized memoir to create subjectivity in the racialized, gendered, outside-the-nation other.

## V. CONCLUSION

The fact that the events narrated in Macoggi’s works *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011) and *La nemesi della rossa* (2012) take place from the 1970s to the 1990s, decades after the fall of fascism and the historical conclusion of Italy’s occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941), confirms the persistence of power dichotomies founded on the colonial constructs of race, gender, and nation which were fabricated to shore up the notion of the Italian nation in the second half of the 1800s and justify Italy’s invasion and domination of Ethiopians, in this case. Specifically,

Selamawit's "marriages" to two Italian military officers are formulated according to colonial *madamato* concubinage paradigms which leave her and her children fathered by them economically, politically, and socially vulnerable. Moreover, Fiorella's *meticcias* status, invented by fascist law in the 1930s as part of Mussolini's racial purity propaganda campaign, render the child defenseless from being taken from her own mother and purchased as a commodity, as a slave nonetheless, by a wealthy Italian woman. Furthermore, Carla Macoggi's inverted *Bildungsroman*, *Kkeywa*, and her fictionalized memoir, *La nemesi della rossa*, demonstrate that the deep-seated, enduring, and naturalized "ideals" of race, gender, and nationality comport "materialist" effects for individuals who are marked as inferior, many of which are psychological in nature. In her two semi-autobiographies, her "autobiographical stories" as she refers to them, the personhood/subject-status of the child protagonist is fractured and annulled by the distorted racial mirror of her Italian guardians: from a beloved child with no sense of race or nationality as they are irrelevant in her relationship with her natural (Black Ethiopian) mother, Fiorella's identity is refashioned by the white gaze of her adoptive mother into a "piccola schiava" ["little slave"], no longer worthy to be cared for and protected. (Macoggi *Kkeywa* 75, 96) Her Italian *zia's* *a priori* determination of her meaningless by the process of epidermalization, her reduction to ego-less skin, results in the protagonist's psychotic breakdown and involuntary commitment to a psychiatric hospital. The inconclusive, troubling ending to Macoggi's memoir troubles the possibility that the racial and gendered Other can construct her subjectivity in the material reality of the white gaze, even via the written word, via giving one's testimony to traumatic experiences. Carla Macoggi's inverted coming of age novel, *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcias*, and her fictionalized memoir, *La nemesi della rossa*, are the author's attempts to bear witness to the atrocities committed against her by speaking from her marginalized position of Black/*meticcias*, female, Ethiopian,

atheist, immigrant, impoverished Other. Nevertheless, Fiorella's memoirs are not exceptional, but representative of the collective Other and demonstrate irrefutably that the fabricated imaginary of the racialized, colonized subject persisted (and still endures) nearly a half-century after the presumed denouement of Italy's colonial adventure in Africa.

**“The (Black Somalian) Surrogate Mother as Remedy for Fractured Identity:  
Race, Nationality, and Transgenerational Boundary Transgressions in Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola*”**

“Una madre sola non basta ai propri figli [...] i figli si crescono in comunione.” Ubah Cristina Ali Farah<sup>64</sup>  
 “Eppure lei era mia sorella, la mia seconda anima, il mio completamento. Senza di lei non mi ero forse perduta?” Ubah Cristina Ali Farah<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> [“A single mother is insufficient for her own children [...] One brings up children in community.”] (Ali Farah *Madre piccola* 263-264) All translations from Italian to English are my own. All translations from Somali to Italian are Ali Farah’s found in the glossary of *Madre piccola*.

<sup>65</sup> [“Yet she was my sister, my second soul, my completion. Without her, wouldn’t I have lost myself?”] (Ali Farah *Madre piccola* 247)

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's (1973 Verona - )<sup>66</sup> debut novel, *Madre piccola*<sup>67</sup> (2007) ["*Little Mother*"], "il groviglio dei fili" ["the tangle of threads"] is the governing metaphor that traverses the narrative and integrates three alternating voices: in this intertwined network of extended, biological family relationships, each individual is an essential thread that renders the others, and is rendered by the other threads, more resilient through the knots that bind them together. Yet, the vast, interconnected, sustaining kinship fabric of the protagonists has been severed by Italian colonial rule in Somalia (1905-1947) and its decades' long repercussions. The aftermath of European dominion (including Italian, British, and French) in Somalia resulted in military

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<sup>66</sup> Ubah Cristina Ali Farah was born in 1973 in Verona, Italy to an Italian mother and a Somalian father. After her father completed his studies in Italy, he returned to Mogadishu and Ali Farah and her mother followed him a year later when she was three years old. The author spent the next fifteen years of her life in Somalia but was mostly educated in an Italian school. She has clarified in more than one interview that: "Italian is my mother tongue, the language in which I was educated and in which I've always written." (Ali Farah "Poetics" 249) Moreover, she didn't learn Somali until age three from her maternal aunt, not from her father. (Ali Farah "Interview" *Wardheer*) In 1991 when civil war broke out in Somalia, Ali Farah was eighteen years old and emigrated with her days' old first child in tow. She resided for several years in Pécs, Hungary, and then returned to Verona, Italy. In 1997, she relocated to Rome where she earned a degree in Italian Literature from La Sapienza University. Afterwards, she completed an oral history project at Roma Tre University which gathered voices/stories of Somalian diaspora women. She also worked for several years with the Archivio Somalia at the Center for Somali Studies at Roma Tre. Ali Farah has been editor of and written for several periodicals dedicated to Italian migrant/multicultural literature, including *El Ghibli*, which she co-founded in 2003, *Caffè*, *Nigrizia*, *IlPassaporto.it*. She has also worked as a journalist and held the position of president of the news group *Migranews*. Her short stories and poetry can be found in several anthologies and journals, including *Nuovi argomenti*, *Quaderni del 900*, *Pagine*, *Sagarana*, *Ai confine del verso*, *El Ghibli*, *Crocevia*, and *Caffè*. Ali Farah's semi-autobiographical short story, "Interamente" ["Entirely"], won the Lingua Madre Literary Competition at the 2006 International Book Fair in Turin. Her two published novels are *Madre piccola* (2007) and *Il comandante del fiume* (2014), the first of which won the Elio Vittorini Prize in 2008 and has been translated into Dutch and English. She describes herself as a "scrittrice somala italiana" ["Somalian Italian writer"] with no hyphen nor abbreviation of either nationality. (Romeo *Riscrivere* 2) Ali Farah is distinguished by Caterina Romeo in *Riscrivere la nazione: La letteratura postcoloniale italiana* (2018) as one of the top three exemplars of authors of Italian postcolonial literature along with Igiaba Scego and Gabriella Ghermandi; moreover, Romeo frames Ali Farah's novel examined in this chapter, *Madre piccola* (2007), as one of the "testi più significativi della letteratura postcoloniale italiana." ["one of the most significant works of Italian postcolonial literature."] (Romeo *Riscrivere* 34, 37) Ali Farah currently resides in Brussels. Additional biographical information can be found in several interviews with her which are included in the Works Cited section.

<sup>67</sup> The term "madre piccola" derives from the Somalian "habaryar" meaning "little mother/woman" and refers also to "maternal aunt." (Ali Farah "Parole")

dictatorship, clan warfare, and anarchy, the latter two of which endure yet today. Moreover, the ideology that condoned Italy's subjugation of Somalia, and essentially all European invasions of the African and Asian continents, lingers even now in the persistent marking of bodies by race and nationality: the colonial binaries of black, brown/African Other and unmarked, white/European citizen justified/y the establishment and maintenance of geographical-political boundaries that differentiate between these bodies, and, thus, impede free movement of persons, dividing them from their family members. Paul Gilroy, in his opus *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), refers to the "unacknowledged, haunting ghost of colonial past" that race is commonly held as fixed, essential, biologically and culturally based; moreover, he holds that the notion of classifying human beings based on race is fundamental in shoring up the widely held "racial and ethnic common sense" that nationality is racially determined. (Gilroy 8) Gilroy affirms succinctly: "These problems were not left behind when Europe's empires were overthrown or faded away." (Gilroy 7-8)<sup>68</sup>

This study focuses on the psycho-affective consequences of these "ghosts of colonial past," to borrow Gilroy's phrase, as manifest in Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's novel, *Madre piccola* (2007), particularly in the problematic (de)formation of identity in an adolescent protagonist. The character's confused, suffered quest for self-integrity, which involves grave psychopathology in

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<sup>68</sup> In *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Gilroy writes from the British context yet draws parallels between "institutional racism" in Britain and the same phenomenon in the United States, Europe, and other former colonial powers. (Gilroy xii) He critiques what he calls a "politics of race" in which race is as yet necessarily equated with nationality, and he calls for acknowledgement of this generally unrecognized, haunting ghost of colonial past which "continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries." (Gilroy 2, 5) Gilroy pinpoints that the "absolute ethnicity and armored identity" of race-culture-nation is consequential in legitimating xenophobia, nationalism, and the subhuman treatment of the "third thing" life forms that racism creates, beings between animal and human. (Gilroy 11) Gilroy's work is, in his own words, "utopian" in that he calls instead for a more civilized country in which "ordinary multiculturalism" is celebrated and viewed as potentially advantageous and enriching, and in which Brits (and Americans and Europeans, one could say) can live with the "unfamiliar," the stranger, the "alien," without "becoming fearful and hostile." (Gilroy xiv-xv, 2)



her case, can be attributed to direct and indirect sequelae of Italy's presence in Somalia. Regarding Domenica, the protagonist under consideration, the ghosts/lingering consequences of Italy's colonial past in Somalia lead to serious psychoaffective consequences in her and her family, including: death of several family members and/or their traumatic experiences of forced emigration due to anarchy in their country; the ensuing unraveling of the sustaining *groviglio dei fili*/the family ties owing to dispersal of relatives in various nations; and these individuals' relentless subjection to power differentials based on race and nationality in their "host" Western countries. In Ali Farah's novel, *Madre Piccola*, the three narrators and their extended families are scattered literally all over the world due to civil war in Somalia following the overthrow of Siad Barre's dictatorship<sup>69</sup> (1969-1991), experiences which beget a multitude of veritable mental illnesses in the solitary, diasporic protagonists, including: depression, hysteria, elective mutism, self-mutilation, and suicide. The political and existential status of the protagonists in *Madre piccola* are those of single, wandering political/war refugees in a dizzying array of countries, including the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, England, the United States. In short, the characters in Ali Farah's novel are "soli al mondo" ["alone in the world"] and, for them, exile is tantamount to "impazzire" ["to go crazy"], thus, the presence of incapacitating psychological disorders is prevalent and oppressive and can be traced to the haunting remnants of Italy in Africa. (Ali Farah *Madre* 114, 204) This analysis of Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's novel will demonstrate that fractured family ties, particularly the most intimate one between mother-daughter in *Madre piccola*, are determinate in the causation of "postcolonial pathology," adapted for the context of Italian

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<sup>69</sup> An overview of the history of Italian colonialism in Somalia and the sequelae of it on the current social-political situation in Somalia is provided in the next section.

postcoloniality from “political depression,”<sup>70</sup> a term employed by Ann Cvetkovich in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). Postcolonial pathology will serve as the theoretical framework which will govern the analysis of the causal relationship between the social-historical-political realm, the phantoms of Italian colonialism in this case, and individual psychopathology as demonstrated in the protagonists of Ali Farah’s novel. Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling*<sup>71</sup> (2012) proposes alternatives to medical-physiological models of depression which locate the etiology of melancholy in the material individual, that is, in his/her “defective” genes, neurons, and/or neurotransmitters. Instead, the scholar holds that depression is the “product of a sick culture” and conjectures: “What if depression [...] could be traced to histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, legal exclusion, and every day segregation and isolation that haunt all of our lives, rather than to

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<sup>70</sup> The term “political depression” derives from the Public Feelings project, a series of national scholarly meetings which began in 2001 at the University of Texas in the wake of the events of September 11th. (Cvetkovich 1,108) The group’s motivation was/is the “desire to think about depression as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than a medical disease.” (Cvetkovich 1) Cvetkovich describes Public Feelings projects as representing the “affective turn in cultural criticism” or, more specifically, “the linkage between depression and political failure” under which she includes the failures of queer politics, the civil rights movement, and decolonization, among others. (Cvetkovich 3,7)

<sup>71</sup>Cvetkovich’s work, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), is divided in two parts: the first is a sort of diary/memoir, what the scholar refers to as her “Depression Manifesto” or “Prozac Memoir.” In this section, Cvetkovich describes her own years’ long struggle with what she calls “melancholy” and “sadness,” terms which she favors as opposed to “depression” with its clinical connotations. (Cvetkovich 15) Cvetkovich attributes her own political depression to the grueling experience of completing and defending her dissertation, searching for an academic position in a “ruthlessly competitive job market,” writing her first book, in summary, the significant anxiety-provoking challenges of launching a career in academia. (Cvetkovich 17) The second section of the work departs from her own experience and consists of a scholarly analysis of various conceptualizations of depression throughout history which preceded and differed from the current, widely-held medical/biochemical model; Cvetkovich designates this section as an examination of “alternative genealogies of melancholy.” (Cvetkovich 116) She includes among the divergent paradigms of depression: the medieval Christian model of *acedia*, which she explains as a “a form of spiritual crisis [...] (which) has significant physical manifestations” and that necessitates a “sacred” cure, which she defines very broadly in contemporary terms to include daily “embodied rituals” such as manual labor, physical exercise, meditation, writing, and performance art. (Cvetkovich 85,112,113) The second model she presents is the Renaissance, Humanist archetype of depression as a constitutive element of creative genius. (Cvetkovich 107) Lastly, she explains the framework of the Public Feelings project, with which the scholar aligns her own work, that views depression as a “political category,” as the “product of a sick culture,” as she clarifies. (Cvetkovich 102). This study’s analysis of the psycho-affective disorders manifest in the protagonists of Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s novels is closely aligned with the Public Feelings project’s attribution of melancholy or “feeling bad” to the social-political realm instead of the individual/biochemical/physiological model of depression and, moreover, to the possible “utility” of postcolonial pathology as a wellspring for political action.

biochemical imbalances?” (Cvetkovich 102, 120) Cvetkovich presupposes the pernicious impact that the cultural and political context can exert on an individual’s psychological well-being, particularly on persons who are marginalized by their race, gender, sexuality, and nationality. In this analysis of Cristina Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola*, “postcolonial pathology” will explain how Italy’s colonial dominion in Somalia and the protracted consequences of such continue to condition the racialized, outside-the-nation protagonists’ life experiences, ergo, these individuals’ emotional welfare or lack thereof. Particular attention will be given to the fundamental task in late adolescence of the formation of a coherent, affirming self-identity and in what ways race, nationality, and unresolved cultural and political questions related to Italy’s colonial past have an unequivocally deleterious impact on the process of identity formation in Black diaspora youth growing up in Italy. Lastly, possibilities for healing, or at least coping, with politically-induced depression as devised by the protagonist of the novel will be presented and correlated with psychiatric research on diasporic individuals and determinants of mental health.

## II. SALIENT FORMAL ASPECTS OF *MADRE PICCOLA* AND THEIR RELATION TO POSTCOLONIAL PATHOLOGY

*Madre piccola* is narrated in first person, a point of view that permits the novel to disclose the protagonists’ intimate experiences and sufferings which are central to the themes of alienation, fractured relationships, and identity formation disturbance. Yet the work is recounted by three distinctive *io* [“I”] whose stories are inextricably intertwined with one another.<sup>72</sup> This narrative

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<sup>72</sup> For another reflection on the formal structure of *Madre piccola*, see Simone Brioni, “Weaving Diasporic Voices in *Madre piccola*” in his *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in ‘Minor’ Italian Literature* (2015), pp. 119-129.

style reflects the cardinal questions of the novel which present the geneses for the incomplete and injured identity of the adolescent protagonist, and the isolation and loneliness of the other two protagonists, as well as the remedies to address them. In *Madre piccola*, the employment and alternation of three narrative voices mirrors the central metaphor of the novel, the *groviglio dei fili*, that has been fractured by war and emigration: the novel is related by three solitary, disconnected *fili*/threads whose lives are nonetheless interdependent and, thus, have a mutual impact in their division; as Barni, one of the protagonists who recounts the complex, interrelated, and apparently meandering stories of a dizzying array of six individuals of the Somalian diaspora in a single chapter, explains: “tutto ciò che le dico è profondamente collegato.” [“everything that I am telling you is deeply connected.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 33) The formal structure of the novel itself replicates the *groviglio dei fili*, the fragmented spiderweb of kinship: the three narrative voices of *Madre piccola*, Domenica, Barni and Taageere, alternate relating their stories with the purpose to re-establish the *nodi*/ties with their loved ones from whom they are alienated. As such, each account is constructed as a conversation addressed expressly to other threads/other family members in the hope of recuperating languishing relationships. For example, one chapter consists of a telephone call from Taageere in America to his ex-wife, Shukri, who resides in Rome with their child; they have been divided by the outbreak of civil war in Somalia, a significant marital dispute, and complications with immigration visas. In the transcribed phone call/chapter, Taageere beseeches Shukri to allow him to institute contact with his son whom he has never seen. He underlines the child’s need for a father as well as his own anguish in not being able to participate in raising his son: “...perché hai dimenticato che i bambini di norma hanno bisogno di un padre?...mi fai sentire come un uomo morto.” [“...why have you forgotten that, as a rule, children need a father?...you make me feel like a dead man.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 72-73) Another chapter is

also a “dialogue” that Domenica directs to Barni, her cousin with whom she grew up and who is her closest family member, so close that she describes her as “mia sorella, la mia seconda anima” [“my sister, my second soul”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 247) The two have been separated for twenty years and, to recover their lost intimacy, Domenica relates to Barni what occurred during her period of wandering as a “mescolat(o) viaggiator(e)” [“mixed-up traveler”] which explains her decades’ long silence toward her cousin. (Ali Farah *Madre* 97) Significantly, each “conversation” is one-sided, that is, the discourse emanates from one individual and the response of the addressee is lacking, which seems to underscore the respective isolation between the interlocutors. Framing the chapters of *Madre piccola* as “conversations” underlines their incarnation of the central metaphor as well as the problem of the novel, that is, restoring broken familial relationships via dialogue; yet it also nods to the orality that has been well-noted in the works of Italian postcolonial writers with significant links to Africa, as is the case with Ali Farah, particularly in Somalia where the oral tradition dates back at least a millennium. However, in an interview with Anna Ciampaglia, Ali Farah cautions regarding the “verbal,” conversational nature of the storytelling in *Madre piccola*: “Non è un’oralità congelata, ma è un’oralità reinterpretata in chiave contemporanea.” [“It’s not an orality frozen (in time), but it’s an orality reinterpreted in a contemporary key.”] (Ali Farah “Parole”) In other words, the communicative character of the narration (a telephone call, conversations, an interview, a letter) is not intended as yet another contribution to a plethora of “exotic” oral African literature, but as a potential means to facilitate dialogue about a current cultural-political context. Simone Brioni in *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in “Minor” Italian Literature* (2015) notes that the oral aspect characteristic of Somali Italian literature, in works such as those by Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego included in this study, do not merely reproduce the oral quality of Somalian tradition. Instead, he claims that these texts have a

social-political as well as literary functions in capsizing the notion “in the Western literary tradition in which orality is considered a precursor of or inferior to literacy”. (Brioni 138) To the contrary, a works such as *Madre piccola* with its “fictionalization of Somali traditional orature aims to restore value to this practice in front of a Western audience, by performing an intercultural (from one cultural context to another), interlingual (from a minor language into a dominant one), and intersemiotic (from orality to literacy) translation.” (Brioni 138-139, author’s insertions) In the case of *Madre piccola*, Ali Farah creates a space for a cultural-historical “discussion” with readers regarding the Somalian diaspora in Italy which is related to unresolved questions of Italian postcoloniality, such as racism, nationalism, and the image of the dangerous invading (usually “African”) stranger.<sup>73</sup>

In addition, it is important to note the significant role that gender plays in the narration of *Madre piccola*: two of three narrative voices are women who recount their own stories, as well as those of mostly other women of the Somalian diaspora. Furthermore, the outcomes of these dialogic conversations differ according to gender: for example, Domenica and Barni, the two female narrators, are successful in re-establishing (at least some) broken ties with lost family members, a significant factor in re-creating community which allows them to heal from alienation and, in Domenica’s case, debilitating depression. Instead, Taageere, the single male narrative voice, remains isolated at the conclusion of the novel despite his, one could say, feeble or at least faulty attempts at re-establishing contact with his son and ex-wife: he does not “evolve” during the story as do Domenica and Barni, that is, Taageere is unsuccessful in altering his situation or

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<sup>73</sup> Distancing herself from the fixed formula of oral African storytelling, Ali Farah emphasizes the contemporaneity of orality in her literary works. She considers a dialogic style as a useful form “per aperture di parentesi, che si può creare solo attraverso il dialogo...credo sia necessario creare degli spazi entro i quali elaborare dei discorsi che condividiamo. Si trovano compromessi che portano a un equilibrio.” [“to open parentheses, that one can create only through dialogue...I believe it’s necessary to create spaces within which to elaborate discourses that we share. We find compromises that bring an equilibrium.”] (Ali Farah “Parole”)

his behavior in some way to re-connect with his loved ones and render his life purposeful and satisfying via meaningful work. In the end, Taageere remains fixed as a loose, isolated *filo*, disengaged from the *groviglio*, an absent father, a dishonest lover/husband, a wanderer from job to job and nation to nation who spends time in prison, who never establishes any solid and meaningful affiliations. Taageere seems to serve as the archetype of a failed man<sup>74</sup> in *Madre piccola*, representative of many other male characters in the novel who are portrayed, depending on the individual, as: disconnected, irresponsible fathers; unfaithful, lying husbands/partners; sanctimonious, heavy-handed arbiters of Muslim law in their families; or economically and socially defeated by their alien status and skin color, salient factors which contribute to their failures in their roles as husband and father. In short, the male gender in *Madre piccola* is depicted as defeated and superfluous; their families manage, for better or worse, without them and are headed exclusively by women.<sup>75</sup> Even the title of *Madre piccola* refers to the centrality of the women who create surrogate mothers/sisters for themselves which empower them to survive traumatic diasporic experiences and establish stable foundations to raise the next generation even without men, a theme which will be further explored in this study.

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<sup>74</sup> For a critical essay on the portrayal of female heroes who are often mothers and failed, impotent male/father figures in Italian postcolonial literature, see Simona Cigliana, "Terre madri e madre terra: Identità, sostentamento, autorialità nelle scrittrici delle ex-colonie italiane" (2011/2012). Cigliana cites Ali Farah's *Madre piccola* and Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia*, both examined in this study, as exemplary of this *topos*. Another reference to negative male figures in *Madre piccola* can be found in Simone Brioni, *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in 'Minor' Italian Literature* (2015), pp. 126-129.

<sup>75</sup> In an interview with a Somalia news organization, *Wardheer News*, Ali Farah confirms *Madre piccola*'s gendered presentation of the different "success" outcomes of the Somalian diaspora: "...in the context of the diaspora, women remain more anchored to the earth, thanks to their daily routines and to their more intimate connections with the society around them. Often it is more difficult for the men: they feel disempowered and disoriented, mere empty shells. Somali women are usually very strong, and men find themselves compelled to reconsider their position in society and the relationships with their partners." (Ali Farah "Interview" *Wardheer*)

Interestingly, in addition to the adoption of three (gendered) narrative voices who “speak” conversationally with each other in order to reconstitute the family network, likewise, the structure of the novel itself is constructed like a spiderweb/*groviglio dei fili*: the chapters are arranged in concentric circles of interconnected strands which consist of the various “conversations” among the three narrative I’s. The narration begins and ends with the outer circle of threads which are composed of discourses directed towards interlocutors who are tangential and unknown to the narrators, then proceeds to the innermost heart of the web which corresponds to the closest degree of familiarity, and then advances back out again. The initial and final chapters of *Madre piccola*, the first related by Domenica, the last by Barni, are unlike the other chapters which consist of unidirectional conversations directed towards other protagonists. In contrast, these book-end sections are addressed to an unidentified, anonymous public not directly involved with the characters, nor the story. This “framing” of the work with discourses apparently destined for the reader suggests that the narrative aims to engage the reader(s) of the novel in a political dialogue, an interpretation which is confirmed by a 2008 interview with the author at the Festival Azioni Inclementi. In response to a question in which Anna Ciampaglia asks her if the work aspires at “disturbing/disrupting” politics, the author replies:

...sono convinta che ciò che permette la scrittura e, in generale, l’arte è proprio la possibilità di dire le cose attraverso le emozioni. Forse è il modo che rimane impregnato più a lungo nelle persone. La comunicazione avviene in modo molto più facile attraverso contenuti di questo genere. (Ali Farah “Parole”)

[“...I am convinced that what writing allows and art in general is precisely the opportunity to say things via emotions. Perhaps it is the means which remains impregnated for the longest in people. Communication occurs much more easily through content of this type.”]

Ali Farah continues, citing by way of example the G2/Second Generation Italian network of writers and artists which was founded in Rome expressly to contend for citizenship rights for individuals born in Italy to immigrant parents; the organization utilizes art, in its multiplicity of forms, as one



of its main political arms. The author sustains that narrative, or any form of art with “emotive content,” as opposed to pedagogical, journalistic, or pedantic scholarly discourse, more readily penetrates the minds and hearts of the public and, thus, can have a social-political impact. One can surmise that this is the precise function of the bookend chapters of *Madre piccola*, the first and last chapters, in which the two women protagonists seem to speak directly to the reader.

Proceeding to the next layers of the spiderweb, the second chapter, the penultimate and the third-from-the last chapters are more intimate, being addressed to concerned, yet peripheral secondary characters who are familiar, to varying degrees, with the plights of the protagonists and others like them. Constructed as dialogic in nature, these chapters aspire to provide insight on the experiences of the political asylees to a sympathetic audience. In one, a compassionate woman journalist covers a state-sponsored funeral in Campidoglio in Rome for drowned refugee victims who had attempted to reach Italy and, as part of the project, interviews Barni for an article to raise awareness about the Somalian diaspora community. Barni is cognizant of the social-political importance of the journalist’s work: “...non è da poco quello che sta facendo per noi. Dei somali, nonostante i nove anni di guerra, a chi importa?” [“...it’s not a small thing, what you’re doing for us. Despite nine years of war, who cares about Somalians?”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 27) In another chapter to a sympathetic non-family member, Domenica writes a letter to her psychiatrist who encourages her to reconstruct her “percorso esistenziale complesso” [“complex existential itinerary”] as an efficacious instrument of healing from years of debilitating depression and self-mutilation. (Ali Farah *Madre* 223) Then, the third-to-the last chapter is an interview between Taageere and a conational interpreter who works for immigration services in the United States and who is searching for a missing Somalian woman. Yet, as is representative of Taageere’s interactions with others in the novel, he displays diffidence about the motivations of the interpreter,

fearing that he will be betrayed and put his own delicate refugee status at risk: “Una parola fuori posto e perdo tutti i miei anni di sacrifici. Mi bloccate la procedura per ottenere il passaporto.” [“One word out of place and I lose all my years of sacrifice. You will obstruct the process for obtaining my passport.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 185) Taageere’s guarded, frustrated, and unsuccessful attempts at “conversations” with others, such as this one with a Somalian compatriot working for the American government, demonstrate his anxieties and his impotence in his state of exile which, in this case, manifest in his comprehensible fears for his own vulnerable political status. Throughout the narrative, Taageere’s efforts at dialogue, both with his family and fellow compatriot refugees, remain fruitless which underline his isolation and his alienation. In both Italy and in the United States, he is continually rendered an outsider both socially and via the institutions; for example, even though he has a small child living in Italy, his requests for a family reunification visa are repeatedly denied. Owing to his lack of identity documents, being an undocumented refugee of war, Taageere languishes for years in the United States, far from his young son. With none too little irony, he refers to America with bitter sarcasm as “...la terra dell’opportunità, il paese dell’import-export, questa è la terra dell’integrazione razziale, questo è il regno della multiculturalità!” [“...the land of opportunity, the country of import-export, this is the land of racial integration, this is the multi-cultural kingdom!”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 189)

The subsequent level of the narrative structure, which is seemingly arranged in concentric circles, moving always towards the center of the novel, are the third and fourth chapters and the fourth-to last chapters: these consist of colloquies which strive to restore severed bonds in the most intimate familial relationships, specifically, Taageere’s phone call to his ex-wife and child, Domenica’s conversation with her cousin-sister Barni after their twenty-year separation, and Barni’s “response” to Domenica in which she relates her own experiences of diaspora in Rome.

These chapters will be examined in detail later in the study as they are fundamental in explaining the manifestations of psychopathy in several protagonists as well as their “antidotes” which principally consist of re-establishing broken family threads/rappports.

And, lastly, at the precise center of the novel, one finds a veritable pause in the “conversations” among the various characters. At the heart of the work, the author interrupts the narrative to insert a sort of lament set in Mogadishu at a crucial historical moment, immediately after the fall of military dictator Siad Barre’s regime (1969-1991). In keeping with the proposition of the very brief chapter as a poetic lament, Ali Farah entitles it with a musical appellation, “Interludio” [“Interlude”], which can also be interpreted as a temporal term which implies a break in the story. The section is set apart historically as a flashback to events ten years prior that were primary in rupturing the *groviglio dei fili*. In this passage, Taageere relates a melancholic, personalized history of the civil war in Somalia which ensued after the fall of Siad Barre’s dictatorship in late 1990. In doing so, he disregards the particulars, such as dates, the significant political players, and the historical-political-social antecedents of what led to a state of anarchy in Somalia; neither does he aim to analyze the ideologies of the warring parties, nor does he pass judgment of who is on the side of “right” and “wrong.” These details are superfluous to his experiences and those of his family members. In fact, Taageere notes that corrupt, savage, nonsensical acts are committed by all sides: by the occupying Italians, by the multitude of factions who are battling to occupy Mogadishu, and by his own brethren: “...per sangue e conflitto gli stessi fratelli lottano tra di loro.” [“...for blood and conflict, the same brothers battle among themselves.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 144) Instead, Taageere’s history reports the impact of civil war on the quotidian, formerly peaceful existence of his family and others like them whose lives and homes are irrevocably destroyed, who must flee from their homeland to suffer as unwelcomed exiles in Western nations, and whose

rapports with their loved ones are fractured, permanently in many cases. He recounts of famine, of outbreaks of fever and unrecognizable diseases, of the death of friends and family which becomes nearly commonplace, and of merciless, slaughtering thieves who enter homes and rape and kill senselessly: “È vero che nella guerra ti abitui alla morte, ma ammazzare, no, ammazzare è un'altra cosa. Non sono cose a cui abituarsi. Ti abitui invece alla morte, ai corpi che devi ricomporre e raccogliere sparpagliati.” [“It’s true that, in war, you get used to death, but murder, no, murder is something else. It isn’t something to get used to. You habituate, instead, to death, to the scattered bodies that you have to put back together and gather up.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 138) Moreover, consonant with the musical/poetical character of the Interludio, Taageere concludes the chapter by quoting consecutively three times from a renown melody by Somalian singer Ahmed Naji, “Xamar waa lagu xumeeyay ee yaa ku xaalmaridoono” [“Oh Mogadishu, you have been terribly wronged, but who will redress the destruction and devastation you have suffered?”]<sup>76</sup> The song, and Taageere’s lament, are a tribute to Xamar/Mogadishu<sup>77</sup> which mourns her devastation and weeps for the persecution of unarmed, defenseless citizens at the hands of the powerful, militarized majority. Nonetheless, Taageere’s melancholic, personal history in this nucleus chapter recounts the deeds of heroes as well, the “giusti e onesti (che) liberarono il paese dai malvagi e dagli stranieri.” [“the just and honest (who) freed the country from the wicked and from the foreigners.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 145) For example, his best friend, Xirsi, is gunned down while attempting to retrieve a beloved photo for his cousin of her dead child; a doctor is nicknamed Gaandi for his boundless benevolence, a physician who “non mangia, non dorme” [“doesn’t eat, doesn’t sleep”]

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<sup>76</sup> The source of the song, its significance, as well as the translation of its title from Somalian to English is by Omar Eno. (Eno 69)

<sup>77</sup> “Xamar” derives from the Arabic term *ahmar*, meaning “the red.” According to Eno, it is a poetic mode of referring to Mogadishu. (Eno 69)

so that he can care for the wounded round-the-clock (Ali Farah *Madre* 140); Taariikh, the father of Domenica, eschews his own discharge from prison for speaking out against political corruption, maintaining his optimism that he will take part in “ricostruire il paese” [“rebuilding the nation”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 142); and Barni, an obstetrician, puts her own safety at risk, going out during curfew and bartering her most precious gift from her defunct mother as a bribe so that she can fulfill a promise to be at a friend’s side when she gives birth.

Positioning an Interlude at the heart of *Madre piccola* devoted to a moment in history ten years prior to the rest of the narrative underscores the import of this particular event, the fall from power in late 1990-early 1991 of Siad Barre, a dictator who had been positioned and sustained by the former Italian colonizers. A void in power remained in Somalia after the military coup that overthrew Barre which resulted in civil war among a multitude of factions, including various ethnic clans as well as foreign powers including the United States. Civil war in Somalia in the 1990s (and beyond) is central to the leitmotif of *Madre piccola*: the severed *groviglio dei fili*, the disruption of sustaining family ties by massacre or dispersal of family members. Political chaos and clan warfare in Somalia continue to this day and traces its origins to the country’s colonial past. Situating this moment of history at the nucleus of *Madre piccola* highlights its role in the irrevocable devastation of the lives of innocent citizens, the novel’s protagonists being exemplars of the Somalian diaspora scattered all over Europe and the United States. Moreover, Taageere’s Interludio/lament bemoans the destruction of a beautiful, genteel, multi-cultural city, a “città dove tutti vivevamo in pace e in armonia, in sicurezza e in libertà. Città meravigliosa sulle coste del lato d’Africa.” [“city where all of us lived in peace and in harmony, in safety and in liberty. A marvelous city on the coasts of the flank of Africa.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 144) Taageere’s brief melancholic commentary on the harmonic state of Xamar, a global, multicultural metropolis,

disrupts the myth of Somalia, and “Africa” by extension, as ahistorical and acultural prior to the arrival of the colonizers with their civilizing mission.

### III. A PRIMER ON ITALIAN COLONIALISM IN SOMALIA

Somalia’s history as an Italian colony is the “least studied (with a) near-absence of relevant scholarly works,” according to historian of Italian colonialism, Nicola Labanca. (Labanca “Italian Colonial Internment” 32, my insertion) In a footnote in his book chapter, “Italian Colonial Internment” in Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s *Italian Colonialism* (2008), Labanca cites Robert L. Hess’ *Italian Colonialism in Somalia* (1966) as one of the few studies devoted exclusively to the subject. However, Hess’ work is dated just a few years after Somalia’s independence in 1960 and, therefore, does not encompass the last half-century of developments which are consequential to the country’s colonial past. A succinct introduction to Somalia’s colonial history which was under the dominion of France, Great Britain, and Italy, as well as the abiding political, social, and economic consequences to its colonial past, can be found in an appendix that Igiaba Scego included in her novel, *La mia casa è dove sono* [“My home is where I am ”] (2012), entitled “Profilo storico della Somalia: Dal colonialismo ai nostri giorni” [“Historical profile of Somalia: From colonialism up to the present”]. This section provides a brief overview of Somalia’s colonial past and the subsequent fifty years which utilizes Hess’ text (1966), Labanca’s previously referenced book chapter (2008) as well as his monograph *Oltremare: Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (2002), Ben-Ghiat’s Introduction to *Italian Colonialism* (2008), as well as Scego’s appendix to *La mia casa è dove sono* (2012). Briefly, Italy’s recognized colonial rule of Somalia commenced in 1905 with the founding of “Somalia italiana” [“Italian Somalia”], yet Labanca differentiates the

establishment of a “Somalia italiana settentrionale” [“Northern Italian Somalia”] in 1905 and clarifies that “Somalia italiana meridionale” [“Southern Italian Somalia”] was added by legislation in 1908; the collective colony then became known as “Somalia italiana” on April 5, 1908. (Hess 102, Labanca *Oltremare* 91-92) Nevertheless, from the mid-nineteenth-century, Italy had long established commercial interests, if not an official political presence, in the Horn of Africa region which includes present-day Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia. (Scego *Casa* 166) Labanca comments that, in effect, there was a private colonization of Somalia prior to the official one by the Italian State, what he deems “un colonialismo commerciale” [“commercial colonialism”]. (Labanca *Oltremare* 94, 278) With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, a direct trade connection was constituted between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea and large commercial companies, primarily the Vincenzo Filonardi Company, a clove exporter, began to acquire property and/or regulate commerce in the area. (Hess 19, Scego *Casa* 166-167) In “keeping with the policy of government by chartered company” (Hess 124), Italy then founded a protectorate in Somalia in 1889, administered first by Filonardi and later by the Benadir Company. (Hess 26, 29, 124, Scego *Casa* 167) In 1893, the Italian State procured control of the Somalian Benadir ports of Mogadishu, Merca, Brava, and Warsheik under the auspices of the “Royal Italian East Africa Company,” also headed by Filonardi. (Hess 38) However, after repeated scandals, including slavery and unprofitable administration on the part of the chartered companies that administered the region, the Italian State was forced to make an official commitment and, thereby, declared a colony in the Benadir region in 1905. (Hess 84) In comparison to the commercial colonial administration, fascism, which arrived in Somalia in 1923, differentiated itself by forceful, military rule, public humiliation of recalcitrant chiefs, and taxation of the Somali people in an attempt to render the colony self-supporting. (Hess 149, 160) In 1936, Mussolini declared the empire of the “Africa

orientale italiana” [“Eastern Italian Africa”], a single colony which included Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. (Ben-Ghiat xvii) With the advent of the Second World War, Somalia became yet again a point of contention among Great Britain, France, and Italy, the first having previously established its own protectorate, Somaliland, in 1886 and the second having founded French Somalia in 1862 in the state now known as Djibouti. (Scego *Casa* 167) With the Treaty of Paris in 1947, Italy was dispossessed of all of its colonies in Africa. As a concession to the defeated Italians on the part of the United States and Great Britain, the United Nations’ Resolution 289-A granted fiduciary administration of Somalia to Italy for a decade (1950-1960) to “facilitate decolonization” of Somalia, paradoxically, by its former colonizer.<sup>78</sup> (Scego *Casa* 169) On July 1, 1960, the independent Republic of Somalia was proclaimed which consisted of the former Italian Somalia, Somaliland, and French Somalia, together with two other territories inhabited by Somalian peoples, and the capital was established at Mogadishu. (Scego *Casa* 170) However, due to multiple, complex factors with roots in its colonial antecedents, Somalia is afflicted to this day by decades’ long instability, including: anarchy, famine, and bloody clan warfare which is further destabilized and complicated by political and military intervention on the part of neocolonial superpower countries, such as the United States. The result has been a mass exodus of political refugees from the nation, estimated at over a million in 2007 by the United Nations. (Wedel 73) Scego attributes the seeds of disequilibrium in Somalia to several factors, one of which is the nebulous, conflicted political-geographical boundaries: the country’s tribal origins had millennia-long established territories which clash with those arbitrarily fixed by multiple colonial powers

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<sup>78</sup> The so-called “Afis,” the “Amministrazione fiduciaria italiana della Somalia” [“The Italian Trusteeship Administration of Somalia”] was granted by the United Nations to Italy from 1950-1960 as a concession after its humiliating losses in World War II. Since this historical moment is central to the next chapter of this study which focuses on Igiaba Scego’s novel *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), this period will be covered in more detail there. For a monograph dedicated to “Afis,” see Antonio Morone’s *L’ultima colonia: Come l’Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960* (2011).



that did not respect the former frontiers. In addition, the assassination of an elected president, Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke in 1969, at the beginning of Somalia's democracy left a political void that set the stage for Siad Barre's twenty-year military dictatorship (1969-1991). Under Barre's regime, Scego notes that, nevertheless, some positive initiatives in Somalia were enacted, including: free, universal health care; public schools; written codification of the Somali language and obligatory instruction of the language in the schools which replaced the former colonizers' idioms; and the inception of women's civil rights. Barre fell from power in 1991 after ordering his Presidential Guard to open fire on a crowd of spectators at a soccer match in 1991; thereafter, Somalia remained in a state of anarchy for two years. In 1992, the United Nations intervened with Resolution 794 which sent American Marines to Mogadishu who were later reinforced by international troops in 1993. Operation "Restore Hope" was to reestablish order and deliver humanitarian aid, yet failed miserably and further exacerbated the precarious political situation, leaving Somalia in the hands of various warlords for the latter half of the Nineties. (Scego *Casa* 174) In 1999, Omar Guelleh, then president of Djibouti, convened a peace conference at Arta which established a transitional government under the leadership of a new president, Abdulqassim Salad Hassan. Subsequently, the 2002-2004 conference in Nairobi named a provisional parliament and proffered a provisional constitution, however, peace was never obtained. (Scego *Casa* 175) Since 2006, Islamic Courts have becoming increasingly influential with the consensus of the populace; consequently, the United States and Ethiopia, fearing Al-Qaeda infiltration in the military, commenced bombing Mogadishu in 2007 which continued until mid-2008 when the African Union sent in troops to re-establish order. (Scego *Casa* 176) Scego concludes her melancholic history of Somalia by characterizing the nation as "una delle aree più martoriate del continente africano" ["one of the most tormented areas on the African content"], a place of famine

and interminable civil war. (Scego *Casa* 177) Ali Farah's *Madre piccola* recounts little of Somalia's colonial and postcolonial history, save a mere parenthesis of eight pages comprised in Taageere's Interludio. Instead, the narrative focuses on the long-lasting, deleterious effects of the country's tormented colonial and postcolonial past on the intertwined family relationships, the *groviglio dei fili*. Nevertheless, it seems significant that the author positions the historical Interlude at the heart of the novel, underlining the centrality of History in the protagonists' experiences.

Just a couple of years prior to her publication of *Madre piccola*, Ali Farah commented on Somalia's political situation with her 2004 essay in *Nigrizia*, "C'è un presidente: Somalia, 14 anni dopo Siad Barre" ["There's a president: 14 Years after Siad Barre"]. In her intervention, she takes a snapshot of the knotty political situation more than a decade after the fall of Barre's dictatorship, describing Somalia as a "stato imploso" ["imploded state"]. (Ali Farah "Presidente" 16) Ali Farah's article lists the combatting players in Somalia's political situation who have divergent and conflicting ideologies and agendas for governing which have resulted in long-term civil war in the country. As she puts it, there is a "...dialettica inconciliabile tra il sentimento di appartenenza clanica e quello di cittadinanza." ["...irreconcilable dialectic between the sentiment of clan membership and that of (a united nation) citizenship."] (Ali Farah "Presidente" 17) For example, in the Sixties right after Somalia's independence in 1960, the idealistic movement of the "Lega dei giovani somali" ["Young Somali League"] dreamed of a united national state with religious, linguistic, and ethnic unity. More currently, since 1991, anarchy reigns with continual clashes among "i signori della guerra" ["the warlords"], "i capi clanici" ["the clan bosses"], and "La Lega Araba" ["The Arab League"], which are further complicated by fruitless and misguided international interventions that represent the interests of a very small number of powerful countries. (Ali Farah "Presidente" 19) Ali Farah underscores that the United Nations, in particular

the United States, are not motivated by concern for Somalians but by their fear of Al Qaeda settlement in the country and their own political interests. (Ali Farah “Presidente” 16-18) In her commentary, Ali Farah outlines the various passages in the change of power in Somalia from 1991 to 2004, citing that there have been fourteen serious attempts to end the state of anarchy, yet without success owing in significant part to “l’odio scatenato dalla retorica tribalistica.” [“the hate unleashed by tribal rhetoric.”] (Ali Farah “Presidente” 19) Her sentiments are voiced by Taageere in *Madre piccola*: “...per sangue e conflitto gli stessi fratelli lottano tra di loro.” [“...for blood and conflict, the same brothers battle among themselves.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 144)

Another perspective on the state of political, economic, and social chaos in Somalia is provided by Nuruddin Farah, Somali author, in his *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000). Set in the same historical moment as *Madre piccola*, Farah interviews a plethora of Somalians who were rendered refugees, including his own family, after the fall of Barre’s military dictatorship in late 1990. In accordance with Ali Farah’s assessment of the political situation in Somalia, Nuruddin Farah underscores the widespread, long-standing chaos and corruption with its roots in Italian colonialism which persists to this day in plaguing his homeland. Alessandra Di Maio in her Introduction to the English translation of *Madre piccola, Little Mother* (2011), refers to Nuruddin Farah’s text and supports his evaluation of the complex, political-historical causes for the lingering chaos and civil war in Somalia. She argues that “the Somali civil war, like other civil wars in Africa, epitomizes the collapse of the postcolonial model,” being the “result of a historical process which began with Europe’s prolonged colonization.” (Di Maio xvi-xvii) Di Maio adds that international mass media portrayals of the country simplistically explain away the state of anarchy in Somalia “merely on the basis of tribal violence and warlordism,” in other words, the cause of the desperate situation in the country is intrinsic to Somalians themselves.

Yet Di Maio highlights the historical, multifactorial, and complex sources of the difficulties in the country which began with colonial dominations by Britain, France, and Italy, followed by the failed, short-lived independence, then Siad Barre's two decade long military regime, problematic interference from the international community, and drought, famine, and "economic and political devastation." (Di Maio xvi-xvii) At the time of the publication of Nuruddin Farah's *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000), his native land had succumbed to vicious civil war which continued/s to destroy the lives of millions of innocent people:

For several years now, Somalis have had no choice but to become refugees, to count themselves among a growing community of the country's internally displaced who are in some way worse off than the refugees, or to ally themselves with one or the other of the armed militia groupings. As a people, we've been at the mercy of traffickers in human misery, cowboy politicians who have cut up our country into fiefdoms run by a cabal of criminals who claim to have the mandate of the clan as their constituency. (Nuruddin Farah viii)

Nuruddin Farah explains his motivation for composing the work which collects an array of stories of Somalian refugees: "to impose a certain order on Somali's anarchy, in syncopated assumption of the wisdom that the person whose story who has been told does not die." (Nuruddin Farah viii)

Ali Farah's *Madre piccola*, albeit fictional, performs a similar exercise as the novel gathers the narratives of three members of the Somalian diaspora and traces the consequences of Italian colonization of Somalia and the ensuing decades' long political anarchy on their interpersonal relationships and their socio-political statuses. This analysis focuses specifically on the relationship between colonial and postcolonial politics and their repercussions on identity (de)formation during adolescence and mental health in a minoritized youth as depicted in Ali Farah's novel, *Madre piccola*.

#### IV. THE ALIENATED AND ALIENATING GAAL<sup>79</sup> MOTHER AND MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOUNDARY TRANSGRESSION IN ADOLESCENT IDENTITY (DE)FORMATION

As conceptualized by Erik Erikson, adolescence is a “normative crisis” in which young adults explore various possible identities in the sectors of love, work, and friendship. During this “normal phase of increased conflict,” youth consider available models, refute some of these and incorporate others, and finally (hopefully) commit to a unique “configuration” of assimilated identities which “crystallize” in his/her unique and whole sense of I. (Erikson 159, 160, 163) Erikson’s theorization of ego solidification in late adolescents diverges from Freud in that the former frames the process not as exclusively psychological and unconscious, but as “psychosocially relative” in nature, that is, as a complex interplay between anatomy, psychology, and historical moment. (Erikson 23) In other words, Erikson conceives of identity formation partially as an irreversible, inevitable developmental-biological unfolding, partially as an unconscious work of the ego, but also as social-political in essence: the *polis*, the term that Erikson employs to encompass the social-political-historical context, can either support or negate possible life roles to youth. Thus, one’s identity is relative to and interdependent on other identities in the community which have an influential, even determinate role in recognizing youth (or not) as they attempt to try on various possible “selves.” (Erikson 21) Erikson describes the typically unconscious operation of identity construction in adolescence as:

...in psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. (Erikson 22-23)

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<sup>79</sup> *Gaal* refers to “bianco, non musulmano” [“white, non-Muslim”] in Somali. (Ali Farah *Madre* 270)

Thus, the emerging adult juxtaposes his/her tenuous sense(s) of self with what s/he perceives is society's and significant authority figures' evaluation of him/her which can provide or narrow prospective "types" or identities that are available to him/her.

A successful navigation of the identity formation crisis is characterized by a period of exploration which ultimately culminates in commitment to roles as a lover/mate, a worker, a friend, and an individual with ideological positions on religion, politics, and world-view. In assessing what constitutes a healthy adult who has achieved an affirming, integral identity, Erikson queries Freud who replies succinctly that a "normal person:" "'Lieben und arbeiten'" ["Loves and works"]. Erikson explains that a healthy, integral adult demonstrates "work productiveness" which, nonetheless, does not distract him/her from the "full right or capacity to be a sexual or loving human being," implying that both aspects of existence, occupational and interpersonal roles and identities, are equally fundamental in constituting a salubrious ego. (Erikson 136)

Furthermore, Erikson conceives of identity as a perception by the individual of a sense of wholeness in the two fundamental life roles of loving and working, as a "subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity." (Erikson 19) By example, he quotes from a personal letter of psychologist and philosopher William James who characterizes his own recognition of self/character, referring to his chosen occupation, as when he feels "most deeply and intensely alive...(when) a voice inside...speaks and says: 'This is the real me!'" (Erikson 19) Nevertheless, Erikson cautions that identity crisis can become conscious, painful, and even impeded: either when "inner conditions," in the case of tribulations of the *anima* as in psychopathy, or when "outer circumstances," such as economic difficulties or racial, national, gender, or religious marginalization by society, limit an individual's possibilities by conceding a narrow range of negative identity choices, which he denominates "caricature identities." (Erikson 88, 310)

Decades later, studies in adolescent identity formation in psychology propose various paths by which the adolescent may lose his/her way as s/he attempts to create a unique, integral sense of self; known as “identity statuses,” one of these is “premature commitment” or “foreclosure” in which the young individual ceases too soon to seek information about possible identities (educational and career paths, choice of mate) and prematurely adheres to an ideology consonant with family norms and expectations. (Fullinwider & Bush 87, Campbell *et al.* 510) Another possibility is altogether irresolution of the identity crisis, known as “identity diffusion” by Erikson, in which the youth remains bewildered and unable to envision his/her particular identity and role(s) in life and/or commit to one. (Fullinwider & Bush 87)

This study examines how Domenica, the central protagonist of Ali Farah’s novel *Madre piccola*, suffers a prolonged period of identity diffusion which is characterized by years of depression, self-harm, and a co-dependent amorous relationship. Traumatized by a migration experience from Somalia to Italy when she is a child, Domenica, the daughter of an Italian mother and a Somalian father, subsequently experiences alienation as a racial- and nationally-based marked body in an unwelcoming social-political context which ascribes to her the image/caricature identity of a “black refugee,” notwithstanding her solid citizenship status. Domenica’s minoritization by the *polis* is further exacerbated by a difficult relationship with a depressed, unsupportive mother who is unable/unwilling to provide a strong female role model to her daughter during a critical period of development. This analysis will demonstrate that, in the absence of a healthy mother figure, Domenica is ultimately able to, at least tentatively, consolidate a unique, healthy sense of self via adopting alternate female role models, all of whom are Black and Somalian, recalling the Black Mother archetype of Michelle Wright. Moreover, Ali Farah’s novel

establishes that the constructed imaginaries of race and nationality impact even the most intimate of rapports, in this case, that between mother and daughter.

The daughter of an Italian woman and a Somalian man, Domenica nonetheless perceives herself as entirely Somalian and as race-neutral as a young child, recalling psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's assertion that the "virginal" black (wo)man is "color neutral" until s/he is subjected to the white gaze which reduces him/her to "a bodily image...(a) non ego." (Fanon *Black Skin* 139-140) Until age ten, Domenica grows up in Mogadishu in the shelter of a multitude of loving aunts, uncles, and cousins, all of whom are Somalian, as well as her nuclear family; she attends Somalian schools, speaks only Somali in the family except with her mother, and is unaware of her "mixed race" other than the fact that she has a *gaal* ["white, non-Muslim"] mother. Moreover, at the wishes of her father, she has only Somalian citizenship, reflecting his national pride and refuting the notion that a European passport is superior to an "African" one: "All'epoca, non richiedere i documenti italiani era ragione d'orgoglio per mio padre, desideroso com'era di dimostrare che scegliere una moglie europea non significava necessariamente non aver sposato la causa della ricostruzione nazionale...(ero) somala e basta". ["In that period, not requesting Italian documents was a reason for pride for my father, desirous to demonstrate that choosing a European wife did not necessarily mean not having committed to the cause of national reconstruction (of Somalia)...(I was) Somali and that's it".] (Ali Farah *Madre* 224) In support of Domenica's childhood identity as exclusively Somalian, instead of a hybrid Somalian-Italian identity, it is significant that the first chapter of *Madre piccola*, the only one recounted from the point of view of Domenica as a child, opens with a verse from a patriotic poem<sup>80</sup> which declares: "Soomali baan ahay" ["Somalo io sono"/"Somali,

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<sup>80</sup>"Soomaali baan ahay" is a renowned 1977 Somalian patriotic poem by the now defunct poet Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad (1946-2005), also known as "Yamyam." In a 2015 interview, Ali Farah explains that the poem was composed immediately after Somalia's independence and expresses national pride and identity: she explains that "I am



Somali,' the refrain of the poem, means 'I am proud of who I am' and above all, 'I am free.'" (Ali Farah "Interview" *Wwardheer*) In the first chapter of *Madre piccola*, Ali Farah intersperses her Italian translation of the poem in a rearranged order throughout the text. An analysis of the relationship of the nationalistic poem to Ali Farah's novel as a text of exile can be found in Proto Pisani and Souny's essay, "De la poésie nationale au prisme du roman d'exil *Madre piccola* de Cristina Ali Farah (2014). The original poem is transcribed below, borrowed from Pisani and Souny's article, followed by Ali Farah's translation in Italian which is found in the first chapter of *Madre piccola*, and my translation in English from Italian.

<p>Waqtiyada socdaalka ah Ayaamaha silsidda ah Xilliyada bal suuree Soojire haddaad tahay Sadarrada dib ugu noqo Soomaali waa kuma?</p>	<p>Il tempo cammina I giorni a catena Pensa anche alle stagioni E se sei uno che ha vissuto Dimmi un po': Chi è il somalo? (Ali Farah <i>Madre 3</i>)</p>	<p>Time marches on The days in a chain Think also about the seasons And if you're one who has lived Tell me something: Who is Somali?</p>
<p>Sinnaantaan la magac ahay Sanku-neeble ma oggoli Inuu iga sarrayn karo Anna garasho sogordahan Sooryo ruux ugama dhigo Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>L'uguaglianza ha il mio stesso nome Nessuna creatura vivente Può essere a me superiore Nessun secondo fine nascondo Se invito un ospite Soomaali baan ahay. (Ali Farah <i>Madre 6-7</i>)</p>	<p>Equality has my same name No living creature Can be my superior I conceal no ulterior motives If I invite a guest (to my home) Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Ninna madax-salaax iyo Kama yeelo seetada Sasabada ma qaayibo Sirto waxaan iraaahdaa Saab aan biyaha cellin Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Nessun uomo mi può accarezzare la testa Né stringere con legacci Nessuno mi può persuadere L'inganno per me È un contenitore che perde l'acqua Soomaali baan ahay. (Ali Farah, <i>Madre 6</i>)</p>	<p>No man can caress my head  Nor tie me up with bindings No one can persuade me Deceit for me Is a leaky container Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Dabayshaan la socod ahay Salfudeydna uma kaco Waabay sunaan ahay Mama samawadaan ahay Samir baan hagoonataa Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>(This stanza is not included in Ali Farah's novel. My English translation is based on the French translation of the stanza by Pisani and Souny.)</p>	<p>I move about like the wind (But) I don't react on impulse I am a poisonous sap Like a porter of charity I swathe myself with patience Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Inkastoon sabool ahay Haddana waan sarriigtaa Sacabada ma hoorsado Saaxiib nimaan nahay Cadawgayga lama simo Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Posso anche essere povero Ma il mio orgoglio è integro Le mie mani non le tendo L'uomo di cui sono amico Non lo eguaglio al nemico Soomali baan ahay. (Ali Farah <i>Madre 4-5</i>)</p>	<p>I may also be poor But my pride is intact I don't stretch out my hands The man of whom I am a friend I don't equate him to an enemy Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Socdaalkaygu waa meel Sahaydaydu waa dacar Soohdintaydu waa caan Seeftaydu waa cudur Naftuna geedka iga suran Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Il mio cammino è un destino Le mie risorse sono un veleno I miei confini sono certi La mia lama è un flagello La mia anima è appesa a un albero Soomali baan ahay. (Ali Farah <i>Madre 8</i>)</p>	<p>My path is a destiny My resources are a poison My confines are certain My blade is a scourge My soul is hung on a tree Somali, I am.</p>

I am”]. The same declaration, which is the refrain of the poem, is repeated nine times in the introductory chapter, underlining Domenica’s singular Somalian identity. Moreover, the first

<p>Nin i sigay ma nabad galo Nin i suguayna ma baa jiro Libta weli ma sii dayn Gardarrada ma saacido Nin xaqlana cid lama simo Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Chi mi minaccia non avrà pace Chi mi finisce non esiste La vittoria non l’ho abbandonata La prepotenza non la sostengo Chi ha ragione io lo distingo Soomali baan ahay. (Ali Farah <i>Madre</i> 9)</p>	<p>Whoever threatens me will not have peace Whoever kills me doesn’t exist I didn’t give up on victory I don’t support abuse I recognize who is right/just Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Nabaddaan u sahanshaa Colaaddaan ka seleeaa Soo ma jeesto goobaha Ninka nabarka soo sida Gacantiisa kama sugo Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Della pace sono l’avanguardia Dall’ostilità sono turbato Non mi volto in battaglia Dell’uomo che vibra il colpo Non aspetto la mano Soomaali baan ahay. (Ali Farah <i>Madre</i> 11)</p>	<p>I am the avant-garde of peace I am distressed by hostility I don’t retreat in battle Of the man who delivers a blow I don’t wait for his hand Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Ninkaan taydu soli karin Umba yeelo suu rabo Sida dunida qaarkeed Sandulleynta ma oggoli Ninna kabaha uma sido Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Sono un padrone di idee e Non accetterò le sue Sono diverso dagli altri (does not appear in Ali Farah) Io non porto le scarpe a nessuno Soomaali baan ahay. (Ali Farah, <i>Madre</i> 11)</p>	<p>I am the master of my ideas and I will not accept his I am different from the others (Me, I don’t accept coercion) I don’t bring anyone their shoes Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Ninka iga sed roonow Siintaada magac leh Ogow kaama sugayee Hana oran ‘sasabo bedow’ Dareen seexda ma lihiye Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Sei stato più fortunato di me Ma non mi ingannerai il beduino Non accetterò i tuoi doni La mia coscienza è vigile Somalo io sono. (Here, Souny’s French translation of the poem seems to vary from Ali Farah’s Italian one. I translated the latter.) (Ali Farah <i>Madre</i> 3)</p>	<p>You were luckier than I But you won’t fool the Bedouin I will not accept your gifts My conscience is vigilant Somali, I am.</p>
<p>Saan la kala jaraan ahay Summadi ay ku wada taal Rag baa beri i saanyaday Anoo xoolo soofsada Xil midnimo anaa sida Soomaali baan ahay!!</p>	<p>Sono la pelle tagliata Tagliata mentre pascolavo gli animali Chi l’ha tagliata è quell’uomo Ma il marchio è rimasto uno solo È rimasto il dovere dell’unità Soomaali baan ahay. (Here, Souny’s French translation of the poem seems to vary from Ali Farah’s Italian one. I translated Ali Farah’s version.) (Ali Farah <i>Madre</i> 12)</p>	<p>I am the sliced-up skin Cut while I was taking the animals out to pasture Who cut it is that man But the stigma remained only one The duty of unity remains Somali, I am.</p>

phrase of the novel leaves no room for doubt as to the protagonist's clear sense of self: "*Soomaali baan ahay*, come la mia metà che è intera." ["Somali, I am, as my half is whole."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 1) Importantly, even though the text of the poem which is interspersed throughout the first chapter is the author's Italian translation, the refrain, *Soomaali baan ahay*, remains in the original language except in one instance. This linguistic choice, as well as a plethora of other untranslated Somali terms<sup>81</sup> found throughout the novel, further underscores that Domenica, as well as the other two narrative voices, identifies primarily with Somali language and, by extension, culture and identity. In addition, analogous to the wistful anecdote of Fiorella's birthday party in Carla Macoggi's *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica*, Ali Farah paints a similar portrait in *Madre piccola* of Domenica's halcyon early childhood while growing up in the bosom of her large,

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<sup>81</sup> Ali Farah includes a Somalian-Italian glossary as an appendix to *Madre piccola*. In a 2006 interview, Ali Farah clarifies that the inclusion of Somalian language in her writings is not to "exoticize" them but to overturn the typical language-power dynamics between European and African languages: "I termini somali che uso non sono numerosi e si riferiscono a concetti, ad oggetti non traducibili in italiano. È una scelta culturale...il mondo di cui parlo è quello della diaspora, lo spazio della narrazione coincide con quello dei miei lettori. I contatti tra popoli e lingue portano da sempre contaminazioni e nuove acquisizioni: credo che il lettore italiano debba essere sollecitato in questo senso. In linea con questa scelta, nel racconto *Madre piccola* ho inserito varianti somale di parole italiane, tentando di capovolgere i rapporti interni al binomio lingua-potere." ["The Somalian terms that I use aren't numerous and refer to concepts and objects that aren't translatable in Italian. It's a cultural choice...the world of which I'm speaking is the diaspora, and the narrative space coincides with that of my readers. Contact between peoples and languages has always implied contaminations and new acquisitions: I believe that the Italian reader needs to be pushed in this way. In line with this choice, in the short story "Madre piccola" (a different text than her novel *Madre piccola*) I inserted Somalian variants of Italian words, trying to overturn the internal relationships of the binomial pairing of language and power."] (Ali Farah "Poetics" 262) Alessandra Di Maio makes a similar observation regarding Ali Farah's manipulation of the Italian language as a political tool in her 2011 Introduction to the English translation of *Madre piccola*: "Cristina Ali Farah's use of the Italian language in her prose is remarkable: in this novel, as well as in her multi-award-winning short stories...she dominates, transforms, and enriches the language imposed by the former colonizer by bending it to her own cultural and artistic needs, thereby effectively inverting the original colonial power relations. Thus, language becomes not only the chosen terrain for significant creative interventions but also, ultimately, the site of resistance." (Di Maio xviii-xix) Simone Brioni in *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in "Minor" Italian Literature* (2015) specifically highlights Ali Farah's technique of not translating Somali lexemes in her works. He claims that her inclusion of a Somali-Italian glossary in *Madre piccola* "disorients" the native Italian speaker by forcing him/her to look up untranslated Somali terms in the text. Thus, the author "transforms the dominant Italian language into an unusual idiom for native speakers," overturning the typical power dynamic between the two languages. (Brioni 108-109) Moreover, Brioni argues that Ali Farah's practice of including untranslated Somali in the novel unsettles the construct of the Italian nation itself by "the consequent disruption of the distinction between natural (or national) and foreign language (which) has a political function, namely to urge reconsideration of the idea of national space and the imagining of a translingual space beyond it." (Brioni 54, my insertion)

extended family in Somalia. To describe the idyllic “before” of her childhood, prior to her suffered emigration to Italy, Domenica adopts the imperfect tense as in a fairytale to describe the peaceful compound, depicted as a flowering paradise, a veritable *locus amoenus*, where she and her extended relatives lived together prior to the eruption of civil war in Mogadishu:

La casa della mia infanzia era una graziosa costruzione quadrangolare dai muri di calce. Sulla parete bianca interrotta dal verde vivo dell’ingresso, spiccava irriverente il fucsia della buganvillea. Al suo fianco, come sorella inseparabile, cresceva una lantana dall’odore di insetto schiacciato. Ogni giorno raccoglievo un mazzetto per il centro tavola, ci spruzzavo sopra il profumo e lo consegnavo gioiosa tra le mani di mia madre...La loro ampia casa (dello zio Foodcadde) sembrava pronta ad accogliere chiunque desiderasse fermarvisi: oltre ai componenti naturali che erano lo zio, sua moglie Xaliima e i loro figli, i parenti e gli amici presenti si succedevano di continuo. Le nostre abitazioni erano comprese in uno stesso *compound*, con un cortile di fiori comune... (Ali Farah *Madre* 231, my insertion)

[“My childhood home was a graceful, quadrilateral construction of whitewashed walls. On the white wall interrupted by the living green of the entrance, the fuchsia of the bougainvillea stood out irreverently. By her side, like an inseparable sister, grew a lantana which smelled like crushed insects. Every day, I gathered a little bouquet for the center of the table, squirted its perfume, and joyfully delivered it to the hands of my mother....Their ample home (of Uncle Foodcadde) seemed ready to welcome whoever wanted to stop by: beyond the natural members of the family who were my uncle, his wife Xaliima and their children, other relatives and friends came in continuation. Our abodes were included in the same compound with a common courtyard of flowers...”]

The flowering, walled garden, which kept out danger and intruders but welcomed a continuing succession of family members and friends, seems a metaphor for Domenica’s previous joyful life as a protected, nurtured child growing up in the context of an intact *groviglio dei fili*, a loving, extended family. Thus, prior to the war and her immigration to Italy, Domenica is aware of her double origins as Italian-Somalian, yet her complexity remains mostly tangential and inconsequential in the context of her network of caring and supportive loved ones. It is only after

her relocation to Europe that she becomes re-defined as “black” and “alien” which becomes problematic for her consolidation of identity during adolescence.<sup>82</sup>

Domenica’s *gaal* mother, however, is exotic and strange in the context of the large kinship group with whom they reside in Mogadishu. She is described by her daughter as “pur sempre italiana” [“always very Italian”]: first, she distinguishes herself by choosing not to don the traditional *diric* [“traditional women’s Somalian dress with wide sleeves”] like the other women in the family and in her adopted country and, secondly, she has a peculiar, albeit handsome appearance. Her Somalian in-laws perceive the woman as almost otherworldly, describing her as “la fantastica creatura” [“the fantastic/imaginary creature”] with “i capelli lunghi di seta lunghi fino alla vita, con la pelle diafana, quasi trasparente, era considerata bellissima da tutti.” [“long, silky hair to her waist, with diaphanous, nearly transparent skin, she was considered beautiful by everyone.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 11, 234) In addition to her complexion and mode of dress, Domenica’s Italian mother is differentiated from the rest of the family by her religious practice: “andava a messa tutte le domeniche persino a Mogadiscio, dove certamente non era indotta dalle circostanze. [...] la religione fosse un tentativo di custodire la propria identità”. [“she went to mass every Sunday, even in Mogadishu where it certainly wasn’t induced by the circumstances. [...] (the Catholic) religion was an attempt to safeguard her identity”.] (Ali Farah *Madre* 237) Since Domenica’s mother is a practicing Catholic, thus, not an observant Muslim as the rest of the family, she is construed as *gaal*, a pejorative term which implies, at best, foreign and strange, and at times functions in the text as a near synonym for “*sharmuuto*”/“prostituta” [“prostitute”], particularly

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<sup>82</sup> For a reflection on Domenica’s *meticcia* racial status in the Italian context and its relation to her problematic identity construction and self-harm behavior, see Simone Brioni, “Mixophobia, Islamophobia, and the Writing of the Body in *Madre piccola*” in his *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in ‘Minor’ Italian Literature* (2015), pp. 67-74.

when Somalian men adopt it to refer to women. For example, *gaal* is employed in the novel to refer to Somalian women who have assimilated too well Western mores, as in teenage girls who dress provocatively and have sex at a young age like Europeans/Americans. The term is also used to characterize unfaithful wives who divorce their husbands to consolidate second marriages with foreigners, that is, non-Somalians/Muslims, as well as irresponsible mothers who leave their children in the care of strangers so that they can work, and those who eat pork. In short, in the context of *Madre piccola*, *gaal* is a deprecatory locution for contemptible, disobedient, infidel Muslim women as well as a collective term for Occidental men and women who are “bianchi blasfemi” [“white blasphemers”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 70, 71, 73, 74) Importantly, the use of *gaal* as a disparaging term, referring to white, European, non-Muslim, can be interpreted as the Somalian protagonists’ inversion of the typical Western hegemonic binaries of race, religion, nationality and, therefore, who is considered civilized/savage.

In addition to her religion and dress, Domenica’s mother seems to choose to distance herself from her acquired Somalian family by isolating herself linguistically and socially. She never learns to speak Somalian and she frequents only other ex-patriate Italians who reside in Mogadishu:

A Mogadiscio, mia madre lavorava per il centro culturale italiano ed entrava prevalentemente in relazione con persone che parlavano la stessa lingua [...] la difficoltà di acquisire una lingua non ancora codificata [...] impedì a mia madre di imparare interamente il somalo [...] non comprendere divenne per lei una sorta di guscio in cui rifugiarsi... (Ali Farah *Madre* 232-233)

[“In Mogadishu, my mother worked for the Italian Cultural Center and mainly entered into relationships with persons who spoke the same language [...] the difficulty in acquiring a yet uncodified language [...] impeded my mother from learning Somali completely [...] not understanding became a sort of shell for her in which she could retreat...”]

Moreover, Domenica’s mother being viewed as an oddity in Mogadishu seems to be the norm in the wider community for other Italians/Europeans who are married to Somalian men: these women are universally greeted as *dumaashi*/“cognata” [“sister-in-law”], a name which is not pleasing to

the Domenica's mother implying that it is not an entirely friendly moniker: "Le dicono *dumaashi*, *dumaashi* e lei non è sempre contenta" ["they call her sister-in-law, sister-in-law and she's not always happy about it"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 6) Both appellations, *gaal* and *dumaashi*, underscore the fact that these (white European) women are strangers who do not truly belong and are not fully accepted nor integrated in the Somalian context, but are present merely through their marriage to a compatriot; again, this terminology capsizes the European conceptualization of who is a citizen and who is a stranger, exposing the arbitrary nature of "in" and "out" groups. Importantly, Domenica's mother is the sole character in Ali Farah's novel who is never mentioned by name: throughout the narration, her daughter painstakingly reconstructs the family genealogy with names and specific relationships beginning with the first chapter of the novel, which underlines yet again the centrality of the *groviglio dei fili* metaphor; however, her mother and the Italian side of the family remain anonymous in the text. In fact, Domenica seems to have grown up with little contact with her mother's family, "I miei parenti materni non erano mai stati a Mogadiscio" ["My maternal relatives never were in Mogadishu"], and she describes her rapport with them as "rapporti resi astratti dalla distanza." ["relationships rendered abstract by the distance."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 236)

The void represented by the maternal side of the family, even after Domenica's and her mother's immigration to Italy when they are still never mentioned, and Domenica's mother's namelessness throughout the entire work highlights her/their extraneousness to the "real," sustaining family which is the extended one in Mogadishu. In short, even in her own child's narrative framing of her, Domenica's mother is depicted in *Madre piccola* as a nameless, extraneous alien, a mysterious, incomprehensible *gaal*, with a monolithic nature as the white, Italian, Catholic wife of Taariikh, Domenica's father. (Ali Farah *Madre* 103)

In addition to Domenica's mother's being perceived as an exotic stranger in Somalia, she renders her daughter alien as well. When the child is born, her mother confers on her a peculiar given name, an Italian one, which vexes her daughter as a child: "Domenica, Domenica!...io non voglio più chiamarmi con questo nome che fa ridere tutti" ["Domenica, Domenica!...I don't want to be called anymore by this name which makes everybody laugh"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 3)

Domenica's foreign name, with Christian connotations nonetheless since it means "Sunday," a Christian holy day, marks her as an oddity in Mogadishu where she passes the first ten years of her life. The name is so marginalizing that Domenica's cousin, Barni, translates it into Somali when they are children and renames her Axad, meaning "il principio" ["the beginning"], as in the first day of the week like "domenica" ["Sunday"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 3) Axad is a bivalent term in Somali in that it can have both a temporal significance, that is, as a literal translation of the start of the week, but it can have an existential-theological meaning as well, expressing "origin." Indeed, Domenica refers to Barni as her own "principio" ["origin"] four times on the first two pages of the novel alone, underscoring the essential nature of Barni for Domenica. During childhood, Barni protects Domenica from bullying boys at school, cares for her like a mother by combing and oiling her hair, and helps her to remember Somali language when Domenica returns to Mogadishu from summer vacations spent in Italy with her mother, trips that alienate Domenica from the extended family and school friends in Somalia by relegating her to a "condizione di tabula rasa linguistica" ["condition of linguistic blank slate"] in which she has to relearn Somali. (Ali Farah *Madre* 1-3, 237) Unfortunately, the seemingly single positive aspect of her mother's Italianity that is valued by the others, her beauty, was not bequeathed to her child, only her eccentricity: "Quante volte mi avevano detto che ero stata sfortunata a non aver ereditato la sua bellezza." ["How many times they had said to me that I had been unlucky to not have inherited her beauty."] (Ali Farah *Madre*



264) In addition to her double origins and doubled name, Domenica's bilingualism compels her from a young age to perform the thorny role of interpreter for her mother. Since her mother needs a translator, even among family members, Domenica must interpret for her, a weighty responsibility for a small child that obliges her to "trasformarmi in una grande dissimulatrice, pronta a compiacere l'interlocutore adulto che di volta in volta mi trovavo davanti." ["transform myself into someone who is good at hiding their feelings, ready to please the adult interlocutor who I found myself in front of from time to time."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 233) The involuntary, delicate assignment of being her mother's linguistic and cultural mediator as a small child, in which she must learn to interpret the underlying content and motivations of the adults for whom she translates and modify the message to please the interlocutors to whom she passes them on, foretells the more onerous caregiving tasks that Domenica will perform for her depressed mother after their emigration to Italy. These responsibilities become so burdensome and age-inappropriate that they impede her own development and identity formation. Later, after reflecting on her experiences through psychotherapy, the adult Domenica realizes that interpreting for her mother signified for her:

...un forte senso di responsabilità, soprattutto quando si trattava di limare le asprezze, di non lasciar trapelare sentimenti negativi. Ero alle prese con voci schiette che scaturivano dall'animo prive di filtri. Voci consegnate a me traghettatrice senza che l'emittente si sforzasse di adattarle al destinatario...divenni una bambina ansiosa, sempre in pena per le possibili ripercussioni dei discorsi malriportati. (Ali Farah *Madre* 233)

["...a strong sense of responsibility, most of all when it regarded smoothing over the harshness, to not let the negative feelings leak out. I was dealing with blunt voices that sprang from the soul without filters. Voices delivered to me, a ferrywoman, that the sender didn't oblige himself to adapt to the recipient...I became an anxious, little girl, always worried by the possible repercussions of misreported conversations."]

Known as "language brokering," the phenomenon of children who translate and act as cultural mediators for their immigrant parents is commonplace in diaspora families and takes place not only within the family context, but in circumstances with life-threatening or important bureaucratic

implications, such as in medical care situations, in schools, and in governmental offices. While it is obvious that the children sharpen their linguistic skills in both languages, that of their parents and that of their host country, these experiences are also associated with psychopathological problems in the children, such as depression, anxiety, self-harm behaviors, as well as (or perhaps because of) disruptions in the typical power and support structure of the parent-child relationship; in effect, the parent is dependent on the child instead of the contrary. (Hua and Costigan 894, Guan and Shen 1334, Valletta 239, Favaro 26, Lanfranchi 12)<sup>83</sup> As is evident from Domenica's reflections on her role as mother's translator, the child perceives performing the task of informal interpreter for one's parent(s) as a tremendous duty that elicits psycho-affective discomfort, anxiety in her case. Domenica's employment of the locution "traghettatrice" ["ferrywoman"] is striking: it implies that she, a child, is responsible for the safety and well-being of adults by carrying delicate messages from one interlocutor to another. Domenica's compulsory duty to maintain peace between the adults in the family constitutes a reversal of parent-child roles known as "parentification," yet these individuals, her mother and her Somalian aunts, uncles, and

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<sup>83</sup> In a recent Italian medical journal article, "I bambini, mediatori tra culture: il *child language* brokering" (2015), Valletta observes that much of the research on "child language brokering" comes from countries who have long histories of immigration, namely, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Australia, and this area of study is a relatively new one in the Italian context. His analysis notes that, even though a child may be completely bilingual in both the mother tongue of his/her parents as well as that of the country of immigration, the language broker is still a child and has not professionally trained as a medical or legal interpreter. He cautions that when a professional interpreter is not used in an emergency room context and a child family member performs this role instead, patients receive less medical services and have higher return rates to the hospital in which they usually present with more complicated and expensive conditions. In addition, Valletta notes that child language brokering changes the family dynamic and can result in higher levels of conflict in the family by diminishing the level of authority and respect that the parents receive from the child. Thus, he includes "child language brokering" under the umbrella of "adultification" or "parentification," a concept in the fields of child psychiatry and psychology which is explained at length later in the chapter. (Valletta 238-239) In the scholastic context, Favaro's study highlights that children are placed in the role of translating their own report card, typically at a conference with both the teacher and the parent(s) present. Favaro observes wryly that the press proudly reports this practice as positive in journalistic titles such as "I bambini traducono la pagella per i genitori" ["Children translate their progress report for their parents"]. Yet she, like the aforementioned references, underlines the role reversal inherent in this activity when children are conferred with "authority," "responsibility," and an "asymmetric" power position over their own parents, obliging the child to become a "parent of one's own parents." (Favaro 26)

extended family, are fundamental for her own development and well-being as a child. Therefore, in her obligatory role as cultural and linguistic go-between for her mother and the rest of the family, Domenica is burdened with a formidable task that has the potential to foster or destroy these important relationships depending on her own diplomacy and cleverness although she is still a child. Thus, Domenica, like many other children who are language brokers for their parents, is laden with worry/anxiety that she will disrupt the family cohesiveness--“le possibili ripercussioni dei discorsi malriportati” [“the possible repercussions of misreported conversations”]—thereby, endangering herself. (Ali Farah *Madre* 233)

Nonetheless, growing up in Somalia until the age of ten in a (somewhat) intact nuclear family, given that her father is frequently imprisoned for his outspokenness against the military dictatorship, in the Eden-like flowering, walled compound of her loving extended family, Domenica is sheltered in part from her mother’s linguistic and cultural alienation and the obligation to bridge the gap between her and the rest of their world. As previously mentioned, a significant stronghold for Domenica is her cousin, Barni: after the mysterious death of her own mother, apparently by suicide when her husband is publicly assassinated for his anti-regime political activity, Barni lives with Domenica’s extended family as an adopted daughter. From that moment forward, the two little girls sleep side-by-side, hand-in-hand, united by blood, by the void of their fathers due to the war, and by the depression of their mothers; in the words of Barni, they are two “bambin(e) pers(e)” [“lost little girls”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 48) The paramount significance of Barni for Domenica is underlined by the numerous ways and times that she refers to her cousin repeatedly in the novel as “Barni mia” [“my Barni”], “sorella mia” [“my sister”], “la mia seconda anima” [“my second soul”], “il mio principio” [“my origin”], “*aabayo*/sorella”, [“sister”], “il mio completamento” [“my completion”], and the fact that even the title of the novel pays homage to

Barni, *habaryar*<sup>84</sup>/"madre piccola," ["little/second mother"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 1, 2, 97, 134, 135, 239, 247) Moreover, the two little girls with melancholic mothers and absentee fathers, are welcomed into the fold and mothered by their aunt, Xaliima, as one of her own children: "è stata la zia Xaliima che si è sempre presa cura di noi. Come un angelo custode." ["it was Aunt Xaliima who always took care of us. Like a guardian angel."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 178) Xaliima serves as an important prototype *habaryar* ["little/second mother"] for both Barni and Domenica: she generously cares for others' children when their parents are deceased/imprisoned/incapacitated and incorporates them into her family as one of her own. In effect, Barni grows up in Xaliima's household, treated as one of her own children, when she remains orphaned: "...mi amava davvero come fossi figlia sua...Era orgogliosa e parlava di me quasi meglio che di...tutti i figli suoi." ["...she really loved me, as if I was her own daughter...She was proud of me and spoke of me almost better than...of her own children."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 161) Xaliima's love and care of Barni is at least partially explanatory in the strong woman that the latter becomes, notwithstanding the fact that she lost both parents during the clan wars in Somalia. Barni seems to serve as a shining model of vocational success and socioeconomic independence of the three Somalian diaspora protagonists presented in *Madre piccola*: she navigates commendably her own difficult immigration experience to Italy, by first working at menial jobs to support her university education and eventually becoming an obstetrician in Rome, and, unlike her own mother and Domenica's, Barni doesn't lose heart when her marriage fails. Her Somalian husband who lived with her in Rome leaves her owing to: "...la sua frustrazione, il fatto che non avesse un lavoro suo, che

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<sup>84</sup> In a 2015 interview, Ali Farah confirms that the title of her novel, *Madre piccola*, was inspired by *habaryar*, the Somali term for maternal aunt. She explains that, in Somalian society, "motherhood is not just a biological link, but a social one. In the household, mothers share with other women the responsibility and care of their children." In the same interview, the author clarifies that she did not have a *habaryar*, since her mother was Italian, but she credits a young paternal aunt, her *eedo*, with having taught her Somali language, adding that she did not learn Somali from her father. (Ali Farah "Interview" *Wwardheer* 3)

dipendesse dallo stipendio d(ella) moglie”. [...his frustration, the fact that he didn't have his own work, that he depended on the paycheck of (his) wife"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 165) He later marries another Somali woman with whom he has four children in Holland and neither he nor his wife are employed. Plainly, Barni is not presented as a facile fairy-tale “success” model of a refugee since sadness, solitude, and loss are common themes of her discourses: from ignorant and indifferent colleagues who don't believe the horrors of civil war in her homeland and the plight of Somali refugees—“ma è davvero così terribile la situazione?” [“is it really so terrible, the situation (in Somalia)?”]—to her pervasive sense of loneliness—“la mia casa è sempre piena di gente..ho sentito il bisogno di riempirla con feste” [“my house is always full of people...I felt the need to fill it up with parties”]—but especially the loss of family and her past life in Somalia and the lack of present, satisfying interpersonal relationships: “Del passato è rimasto ben poco. Certamente un marito mi manca, dei figli miei...Per me, ciò che conta è riuscire a lavorare. L'intensità aiuta a pensare di meno.” [“Very little remains of the past. Certainly, I miss having a husband, my own children...For me, being able to work is what counts. Intensity helps me to think less (about the past).”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 17-18, 26-27) Yet, of the three narrative voices in *Madre piccola*, Barni is the most solid and the least tormented and later she is fundamental in Domenica's healing from years' long depression. The strong exemplum of *habaryar* that Xaliima incarnated during the childhoods of the two “lost little girls,” Domenica and Barni, rendered the latter a resilient, strong woman who was able to fabricate a life for herself in a country where she is alone and minoritized. Xaliima's *habaryar* example, akin to Michelle Wright's Black Mother

archetype,<sup>85</sup> serves as an important model two decades later for the provisional family that Barni and Domenica will create to raise Domenica's son together in the absence of his biological father.

Returning to the (de)formation of identity of Domenica, a watershed moment occurs when her mother abruptly decides to return to her own country of origin with her ten-year old daughter, leaving behind Domenica's father, Barni, and the rest of the family in Somalia. Analogous to Macoggi's *Kkeywa: Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011) in which the protagonist's world is capsized and she herself is redefined overnight by her relocation to Europe, in a similar fashion, Domenica's immigration to Italy divides her childhood into a distinct "before" and "after." Even though Domenica does not lose her mother as did Fiorella, at least physically, her previous felicitous existence with her parents, her "sister" Barni, her aunts, uncles, and cousins, "decine di bambini" ["dozens of children"] living in the same home, unexpectedly ends and, suddenly, "mi trovavo improvvisamente in una casa silenziosa, in cui le visite erano assai rare e singolari...eravamo sole, noi due." ["I suddenly found myself in a silent house, in which the visits were rather rare and unusual....we were alone, us two."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 242, 244) Domenica suffers the immigration to Italy as a veritable trauma, as an estrangement from most of her family, particularly the separation from her beloved Barni, as a subtraction of "una delle mie voci" ["one of my voices"], the Somali language, and as a "totale rimozione del mio breve passato" ["a total removal of my brief past"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 239, 243) Domenica's sense of disorientation and scission owed to the loss of most of her family, one of mother tongues, her *patria*, and her past is representative of the experience of most immigrant children to Italy. A 2012 national conference

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<sup>85</sup> The trope of the Black Mother for creating identity/subjectivity in the African diaspora, as proposed by Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black* (2004), will be retaken up at length in the section on healing from politically-induced depression in this chapter. (Wright 142)

held in Ancona<sup>86</sup> on “The School, The Family, and Integration” examined the many and ominous difficulties that migrant children face in their “assimilation” in Italian schools. As is consonant with the accounts of Fiorella and Domenica, Macoggi’s and Ali Farah’s child protagonists, the conference findings included: families are often fractured with one parent and/or some of the children remaining behind in the country of emigration which necessitates a painful reconfiguration of the family structure and dynamic; economic and social conditions change drastically, typically for the worse; in most cases, language becomes a significant challenge, particularly for the adults in the family, which comports significant social and bureaucratic struggles and capsizes the typical parent-child dynamic since children must translate for their parents; the new host country often represents a disappointment, not fulfilling the mythical promises of economic and social well-being that were imagined prior to entry, yet the possibility of returning to the homeland is inexistent due to war or economic circumstances; and children lose important points of reference, such as one of their parents, siblings, and/or the elderly in the family who could provide a sense of history and family connectedness. (Favaro 21, 24) In short, immigration marks a crisis in the history of a child/family that irrevocably divides it into: “un ‘prima’ e un ‘dopo’...che comporta modificazioni importanti che coinvolgono piani e soggetti diversi. Essi possono infatti riguardare gli aspetti giuridici, sociali, economici, psicologici e della relazione (interna alla famiglia stessa ed esterna, con i servizi), progettuali.” [“a ‘before’ and an ‘after’...which entails important modifications that involve many different planes and subjects. In fact, they can concern juridical, social, economic, psychological, relational (both within the family and with bureaucratic services), and planning aspects.”] (Favaro 21,23) Favaro highlights in particular the injurious effects of the “absence of an entire generation,” the grandparents, who

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<sup>86</sup> The conference was entitled: “Insieme: Scuola, famiglia, integrazione” [“Together: The School, The Family, and Integration”] and was held in Ancona from September 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> in 2012.

rarely participate in the immigration. While Domenica makes no reference to grandparents, either in Somalia or in Italy, she mentions often the absence of her beloved aunt and uncle, Xaliima and Foodcadde, whom she grew up with in the same family compound until age ten: after becoming separated from them when she and her mother relocate to Italy, she loses her aunt Xaliima a second time when the latter drowns in an attempt to escape from Somalia during the civil war; moreover, Domenica remains disconnected also from her uncle who is a refugee in the Netherlands after the death of his wife. Favaro's report affirms that the loss of "gli anziani" ["the elderly"] after migration represent a significant "vuoto generazionale" ["generational void"], both historically since they typically transmit the family story from generation to generation, as well as affectively: "A volte rimpianti con nostalgia, altre volte mai consosciuti e solo evocati, l'assenza dei nonni e degli anziani rende più povero il romanzo familiare, accorcia e fa più monca la memoria." ["At times, nostalgic regrets, other times never known and only evoked, the absence of the grandparents and the elderly renders the family story poorer, makes memory shorter and incomplete."] (Favaro 24) It is not by chance that, after years of depression and therapy, Domenica writes her own personal and family narrative<sup>87</sup> on the advice of her psychologist in an attempt to remember and reconnect with the "legami temuti effimeri" ["bonds feared to be ephemeral"]; as part of this exercise, she reconstructs her fragmented family tree which she describes as "come uno specchio di vuoti storico-personali" ["like a mirror of historical-personal voids"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 224) As Favaro's study predicts, Domenica's traumatic migration experience pokes holes in her family tree and breaks off the branches by placing unbridgeable distances and impassable communicative barriers between family members, fracturing the *groviglio dei fili* and creating gaps of memory/family history. These "historical-personal voids," in Domenica's words, are accompanied

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<sup>87</sup> For a reflection on the efficacy of narration in constructing identity in *Madre piccola*, see Silvia Contarini, "Narrazioni, migrazioni e genere" (2010), pp. 139-141.



by grave psychological consequences, both in terms of affect and identity formation as will be demonstrated in the case in Ali Farah's protagonist.

In addition to the loss of or unbridgeable distances from her loved ones, especially Barni, and secure sense of home/place, Domenica's identity is reframed by the *polis*, by the new social-political environment in Italy, as was also the case with Macoggi's protagonist. Overnight Domenica becomes subaltern: she is perceived as "black" and as "outside-the-nation," or, at best, as having liminal<sup>88</sup>/uncertain rights to belonging. She is most commonly "read" as a racially-marginalized immigrant even though she is an Italian citizen, one of her first languages is Italian, and she resides with her Italian mother: "Essere per metà somala divenne un'enorme scocciatura per la quale mi trovavo sempre a dover 'giustificare' padronanza linguistica e carnagione, senza godere di nessun vantaggio alternativo." ["Being half Somalian became an enormous bother for which I constantly found myself having to 'justify' linguistic competence and complexion, without enjoying any alternate advantage."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 243) The choice of the verb "divenire" ["to become"] here signifies a change in status and verifies that her complex origins remained for the most part in the background in Somalia; that is, Domenica's "atypical" combination of linguistic

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<sup>88</sup> The first use of "liminal" to describe in-between, ambiguous places, persons, and statuses appears in anthropologist Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969). He coined the word, adapting it from the Latin *limen* meaning "threshold," to describe the status of "liminal *personae*", "threshold people," who are: "ambiguous...persons who slip through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." (Turner 94-95) Turner explains the qualities of liminal persons as: passivity, silence/mutism, the requirement of abject obedience, anonymity, submissiveness, propertylessness, and inferior homogenous group status. (Turner 95, 96, 99, 103, 106) Interestingly, he argues that "threshold people" are often attributed with "magico-religious properties" which render them "dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting" to those of the majority, a common current discourse of extreme right, isolationist political groups both in Italy/Europe and the United States with the rhetoric of the robbing, raping, drug-pushing "illegal" alien. (Turner 108) Clearly, the concept of "liminality" as well as the characteristics compulsorily assigned to these persons are descriptive in the reduced subject status that immigrants from non-hegemonic non-Western countries to the United States and European countries find themselves in, particularly the racially minoritarian individual. Even though Domenica's citizenship is unquestionably Italian, the perception of her marginal, ambiguous status, that is, her "liminality," is inscribed in her complex national origins, linguistic capabilities, and ambiguous race and is consequential in her alienation in Italy.

skills, skin tone, and kinship origins were not automatically subordinating in her homeland: “a Mogadiscio si trattava più di prendere atto che di isolare una differenza.” [“in Mogadishu, it was more of an acknowledgment than singling out a difference.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 24) Yet, in Italy, these very same characteristics fundamentally transform her social identity. In addition, her verb tense choice for “divenne,” the absolute past/*passato remoto*, underlines the episodic, abrupt change in her status. Paradoxically, even though Domenica was previously regarded by her Somali cousins as “bianca come il latte” [“white like milk”], she abruptly “becomes black” in Italy with all the consequential loss of social-political status; it is not until she is an adult, after years of psychotherapy, that she realizes that “(è) il contesto intorno a modificare la percezione della realtà.” [“(it’s) the surrounding context that modifies the perception of reality.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 243) Avoided by her classmates and divided from her loving family, except her mother who is perennially depressed, in Italy Domenica becomes anonymous, an anomaly: “mi sentivo eccentrica e indefinita” [“I felt eccentric and undefined”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 245) Thus, the moment of immigration represents a “boundary event”<sup>89</sup> for Domenica in that she is suddenly framed by the novel context as a liminal “Black-African/Italian,” an apparently self-contradictory and unintelligible term. In Favaro’s 2012 sociological study of foreign-born schoolchildren, most of them reported disturbing memories of such a “boundary event” after their immigration to Italy which Favaro defines as: “quegli episodi che segnano il disvelamento di una condizione di minoranza...(cioè) uno sguardo che interroga e giudica, una frase che connota e stigmatizza; un gesto o un movimento del corpo che distanzia e separa.” [“those episodes that mark the unveiling of a condition of minority...(for example) a look that interrogates and judges, a phrase that

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<sup>89</sup> Favaro adopts the term “boundary event” which origin she credits to F.W. Twine in “Brown skinned white girls: Class, Culture, and the Construction of White Identity in Suburban Communities,” *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1996, pp. 205-224. (cited in Favaro 20)

characterizes (one) or stigmatizes; a gesture or a movement of the body that distances and separates.”] (Favaro 20, my insertion) As theorized by Favaro, Domenica’s boundary event becomes her exclusion in the school environment where she reports being unable to make friends at school:

I miei compagni, con i loro rapporti consolidati dalla prima elementare, sembravano sparire all’uscita di scuola. In classe, dapprima fui accolta con viva curiosità, per poi essere compresa nell’anonima schiera...l’anonimato in cui precipitai credo sia stato la principale causa dell’amnesia che oscurò i miei dieci anni successivi. (Ali Farah *Madre* 243)

[“My classmates, with their friendships already established from first grade, seemed to disappear at the end of the school day. In class, I was greeted at first with lively curiosity, to then be relegated to the anonymous multitude...I believe that the anonymity into which I plummeted was the principal reason for the amnesia which obscured the next ten years of my life.”]

In fact, Domenica’s entire narrative thread in *Madre piccola* does not contain one example of a friend, a mentor, or a significant teacher, neighbor, or even Italian relative who facilitated her insertion into her new environment, which exacerbates further the loneliness and trauma of her diaspora experience.

José Esteban Muñoz, a scholar of cultural studies, visual culture, and queer and race studies, wrote a seminal essay that inspired such scholars as Ann Cvetkovich, previously referenced in the introduction for her study on depression as a cultural and political phenomenon, and others who work on “affect theory.” “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position” (2006) links “position with feeling,” that is, one’s minoritarian subjectivity necessarily implies a depressive state of being. (Muñoz 680) The central question of Muñoz’s piece is: “How does the subaltern feel?” an explicit reference to yet distinction from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s query: “Can the subaltern speak?” which he cites. (Muñoz 677) While Muñoz interrogates specifically the affect of the “Latina race,” the “brown feelings” that he describes are applicable to individuals who are “antinormative” for race, gender, and/or sex, as in

non-white, not male, non-heteronormative sexuality, non-Christian, non-Western. (Muñoz 679) Muñoz's essay is not concerned with dismantling what he describes as the "reductionist positivistic models of race;" instead, he examines the performativity of race, that is, what does race do to the "antinormative" individual? What are race's effects on the individual who must constantly be preoccupied with "self in relation to others," perennially "cognizant of the way it is not and can never be whiteness?" (Muñoz 679-680) Muñoz holds that race is an affect, a feeling, a "depressive position." (Muñoz 681) For Domenica, a Somalian-Italian in Italy, race implies alienation, anonymity, and a feeling of being strange, feeling "eccentrica e indefinita" ["eccentric and undefined"] as she describes it. (Ali Farah *Madre* 245) Her ambiguity, insignificance and marginalization in Italy lead to "brown feelings" in her childhood, embodied as a state of depression, which is owed to her subaltern position and the trauma of migration.<sup>90</sup> After just a couple of years in Italy, Domenica becomes dominated by "brown feelings," by depression for the next twenty years of her life: "...non mi rimase un granché della luce che emanavo." ["...not much remained of the light that I used to emanate."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 244) When her closest relative and friend, Barni, encounters her for the first time two decades after Domenica's relocation to Italy as a child, Barni describes her lost "sister" almost exclusively in terms of her depressive affect. She sees Domenica as: "malinconica" ["melancholic"], as having "occhi di pianto" ["crying eyes"], for whom "bastava un nonnulla per farla lacrimare" ["the slightest little thing was sufficient to make her cry"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 47, 49)

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<sup>90</sup> In Favaro's previously cited study on the common difficulties of immigrant children in the Italian school system, she notes that many of these children are referred for psychological difficulties or learning problems in numbers disproportionate to the autochthonous population. In one locality where there are many diaspora children, Seriate in the province of Bergamo, such referrals increased 230% in one year alone (school year 2006). However, after consultation with medical and psychology professionals, it was found that only 12% of these children had a verifiable "neuropsychiatric" disorder, while 78% were "disturbed" for the challenges linked to their disorientation after the migratory experience and the struggles of trying to create friendships and integrate themselves in the new environment where they are minoritized by race, nationality, and class. (Favaro 35)

The arbitrary nature of both race and nationality, which nonetheless have very real material consequences for the individual minoritized as Other, are well represented by Domenica's experience: in Somalia, she is perceived as white and *gaal* like her mother, "white as milk," yet in Italy she is seen as black and foreign/African, not Italian. In effect, Domenica is both and neither: she has "messy complex origins," as proposed by Paul Gilroy in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005). However, Domenica's "messy origins" become problematic and minoritizing for her only upon her immigration to Europe where, as Gilroy confirms: "notions of identity and belonging...are overly fixed or too easily naturalized as exclusively national phenomena." (Gilroy *Postcolonial* 5) Speaking from the British context, Gilroy argues nonetheless the ubiquity of "openly racialized modernity" in European countries and in the United States: that is, in the eighteenth century, pseudo-scientific, politically-motivated discourses produced hegemonically ordered races in order to justify European empire building which "necessitated" the dehumanization of colonized people. Yet the imaginary dialectic of hierarchically opposed races is now considered legitimate, a fact of nature. Put simply, national identities/ethnicities rooted in colonialism are the foundation on which modern nation-states are reified and, hence, exclusionary. (Gilroy *Postcolonial* 42) Gilroy holds that "the messy complexities of social life," as is the case of Ali Farah's protagonist who has a Somalian father and an Italian mother, is completely bilingual, grows up for the first decade of her life in Mogadishu, and later emigrates to Italy, is uninterpretable under the ideology of "openly racialized modernity" since race, implying "pure" states of being, is necessarily tied to nationality. (Gilroy *Postcolonial* 6) Gilroy asserts that former colonial/current capitalistic powers are unwilling to confront these "messy complexities" which would obligate them to recognize the innate humanity and, thus, the undeniable rights owed to all beings.<sup>91</sup> Instead, they persist in "recast(ing)

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<sup>91</sup> The "myth of (racial and cultural) homogeneity" (Lanfranchi 8) is omnipresent in Italy and is further nurtured by right and extreme right political parties, such as the "Lega/Lega Nord" ["The Alliance/The Northern Alliance"], who

a Manichaean fantasy in which bodies are only ordered and predictable units that obey the rules of a deep cultural biology scripted nowadays in the inaccessible interiority of the genome.” (Gilroy *Postcolonial* 6) Following the reasoning of Gilroy, Domenica’s body is read in the Italian context as an inexplicable black “African” with dubious, second-class (liminal) nationality. What Gilroy dubs the “rational irrationalities of raciology” is the presumed veracity of hierarchically ordered life forms that are incontrovertibly bound to the modern state; however, Gilroy notes that this (il)logic must be shored up by amnesia of the historical and political origins of race, as well as by revisionist historiography which eliminates or attempts to “contextualize” the brutalities of colonialism. (Gilroy *Postcolonial* 43) This is particularly true in the Italian context in which the still prevailing rhetoric of “italiani brava gente” [“The Italians, good people”] is employed to rewrite/whitewash Italy’s colonial history, that is, to differentiate the atrocities committed by other European nations in Africa and Asia from those by the Italians, or deny them entirely.<sup>92</sup> In

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promulgate the ideology of a “pure Italian race” and the necessity to maintain it thus so and protect it from “dilution” by invading foreigners, a clear modern-day recurrence of Nazi discourse. In fact, in the recent Italian elections of March 4, 2018, the Lega party took 17.5% of the vote and the closely allied Forza Italia party took 14.2%. ([www.ilpost.it/2018/03/05/analisi-elezioni-politiche/](http://www.ilpost.it/2018/03/05/analisi-elezioni-politiche/)) Moreover, there are always more frequently occurring violent racist attacks in Italy by neo-fascists, acting both alone and in an organized fashion, against the perceived invasion of dangerous foreigners or those who “rob” work from Italians. However, the neo-fascists do not typically target all foreigners as a collective group but specifically the “extracomunitari” [“undocumented non-Europeans”]; “extracomunitario” is, in fact, a frequently racial term typically synonymous with “marocchino” [“Moroccan”], a pejorative adopted to refer universally to black immigrants which implies that all “Africans” are identical. Nonetheless, as Lanfranchi’s study highlights, Italy has always been a country of em/immigration and the “solution” is not to bar or ignore the reality but “lasciar cadere il mito dell’omogeneità e...sviluppare gli strumenti adatti ad una pedagogia interculturale.” [“let go of the myth of homogeneity and...develop the appropriate instruments for an intercultural teaching.”] (Lanfranchi 8) In fact, the latest systematic analysis by ISTAT, the governmental body in Italy that gathers statistics on the population, found that of 60,665,551 residents in Italy on January 1, 2016, 8.3% of these (5,026,153) had a foreign citizenship. Depending on the region, the percentage of foreign residents in Italy ranges from 0.2% to 25.8% of the population, with more living in the north, in Lombardia. Thus, in reality, Italy is a heterogeneous country even though the popular imaginary denies that it is so. ([https://s2ew.caritasitaliana.it/materiali/Rapporto\\_immigrazione/2017/Sintesi\\_RICM2016.pdf](https://s2ew.caritasitaliana.it/materiali/Rapporto_immigrazione/2017/Sintesi_RICM2016.pdf)).

<sup>92</sup> For a brief history of Italy’s barbarous practices in its colonies in Libya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea, which included mass forced migrations of people to sequestered ghettos or internment camps with forced labor, the illegal dumping of nerve gases on civilian populations, and the deportation and summary execution of indigenous leaders and their families, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller’s *Italian Colonialism* (2008), especially the chapters by Nicola Labanca, Giorgio Rochat, and Alberto Sbacchi.

Domenica's new Italian/European context, her hybrid, complex race/nationality/linguistic abilities are indecipherable and marginalizing, instead of valued. As she says, they confer no advantage nor elicit the interest much less the friendship of her classmates. Importantly, prior to her immigration to Italy, Domenica's only experience with diminishment of her person based on race and nationality was via her interactions with a (white Italian) Catholic nun at a summer school she attended in Mogadishu. Suor ["sister"] Ernestina belittled the children, admonishing them that: "...noi eravamo uguali a tutti i somali, pigri e refrattari all'impegno." ["...we were the same as all Somalians, lazy and refractory to buckling down in school."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 228) Hence, only by means of her dealings with Italians/Europeans, Domenica perceives in a deleterious manner the weight of her "doppiezza" ["doubleness"], the "weight of her melanin" per Fanon. (Ali Farah *Madre* 127, Fanon 128) As Michelle Wright affirms in *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004): "Blackness as a concept... cannot be limited to a particular national, cultural, and linguistic border;" like Gilroy, she notes that the Black Other was discursively produced in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century by "Western intellectual tradition" as the counterpart to the white subject in order to create and reify the latter. (Wright 4) Wright defines "black" not as a skin color nor a race/ethnicity nor a nationality, but as a social-political status, as a (non)subject status: "I use the term Black as a signifier for the complex negotiation between dominant and minority cultures that all peoples of African descent in the West...must make in order to survive, whether physically or psychologically." (Wright 25-26) Nonetheless, Ali Farah's *Madre piccola* does not engage directly with the artificial construction of race and nation, but the material effects of it, especially the psychoaffective ones. Her protagonist, Domenica, describes the affective consequences of growing up in Rome as part of a "minority culture," as a "mezza mista," as a "depressive position" per Muñoz: "Questa città mi lasciava perdere. Io, così

meschinamente fuori posto, ragione di tanto dolore...Io, nella mia pochezza...Mi dava un disgusto, non so come dire. Quella tristezza senza nome, fissità di luogo.” [“This city forgot about me. I, so wretchedly out of place, the reason for so much pain...I, in my inferiority.... It sickened me, I don't know how to explain it. That sadness without a name, fixed in place.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 99)

Domenica's “becoming black,” literally transforming race when she immigrates to Italy, is yet another toxic factor at a vulnerable time in her life, when she is on the cusp of adolescence and attempting to construct an affirming, coherent sense of self.

Additionally, Domenica's disturbed sense of “I” as conferred on her by the *polis*, the social-political context in Italy, and by her traumatic migration experience is exacerbated greatly by the lack of protection and support from her mother: the text never provides one example of a moment when the woman facilitated her daughter's insertion into the new school and environment, nor when she demonstrated emotional support or sympathy to her child during her suffered transition to living in Italy. Instead, the mother is depicted as a severely depressed woman with a dependent personality, perennially awaiting the arrival of her husband to begin again their conjugal and family life in Italy which never comes to fruition. In the end, Domenica's mother is unable to accomplish establishing a salutary existence for herself and her daughter: “...(mia madre) non riusciva a rassegnarsi a condurre una vita autonoma.” [“...(my mother) was never able to resign herself to conducting an autonomous life.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 248) With her debilitating depressive crises becoming more frequent after her return to Italy, Domenica's mother furnishes a feeble example of womanhood for her daughter who is attempting to construct her own identity as a young woman in a difficult ambient. Her mother's frail and ill female role model is in clear contrast to that of Xaliima, Barni's and Domenica's archetypal *habaryar*, who embodies a strong (Black Somalian) woman who contentedly gathers additional children into her own already



numerous household and loves and nurtures them as her own, providing a solid foundation on which they can establish an affirming identity, Barni being a case in point. Moreover, Domenica's mother's solitude and melancholy oblige her child to become a caretaker for her own mother. This pattern of mother-daughter role inversion began when Domenica was a very small child when she was required to interpret and act as a cultural mediator for her mother in Somalia, a task which rendered her an "anxious little girl," in her words. Yet, in their new solitary life in Italy, the tasks and responsibilities that Domenica is compelled to carry out for her depressed mother become more burdensome and, therefore, significantly more deleterious to her own development:

L'isolamento crescente era alimentato e alimentava le sempre più ricorrenti crisi di mia madre. Io cercavo di lenire la sua sofferenza, la proteggevo...coltivai la convinzione che la sofferenza di mia madre avesse origine nella mia estraneità, nella distanza che temeva, nelle assenze che evocavo. Cominciai a considerarmi una reprobata che infligge alla persona che più ama un tormento immeritato, dimenticando che la radice del dolore non era in me, ma nell'uomo che aveva scelto di amare. Tentai di conquistarmi la sua benevolenza dedicando la mia vita interamente alla sua felicità: ero bravissima a scuola, le facevo da mangiare, tenevo in ordine la casa, frequentavo solo persone inquadrato, studiavo il pianoforte. Desideravo che mi accarezzasse, mi abbracciasse, mi cullasse come quand'ero bambina, ma ero piuttosto io che l'accarezzavo, l'abbracciavo, la cullavo. (Ali Farah *Madre* 244-245)

[The growing isolation had been nourished and nourished always more the recurring crises of my mother. I tried to assuage her suffering, I protected her...I cultivated the conviction that my mother's suffering had its origins in my extraneousness, in the distance that she feared, in the absences that I evoked. I began to consider myself a reprobate who inflicts on the person one most loves an undeserved torment, forgetting that the root of her pain was not in me, but in the man she had chosen to love. I tried to win her benevolence by dedicating my life entirely to her happiness: I was the perfect student at school, I prepared her food, I kept the house in order, I frequented only serious persons, I studied the piano. I wanted her to caress me, to hug me, to cuddle me like when I was a little girl, rather it was I who caressed her, hugged her, cuddled her.]

Not only is Domenica bewildered, isolated, and minoritized in her new life in Italy at a vulnerable point in her development, this passage reveals that the girl also feels responsible and guilty for her mother's depression which explains the solution that she adopts: she becomes a mother to her own mother. The significant household tasks that she takes on as well as the psychological caregiving that she provides, trying to be the perfect child to elicit her mother's goodwill and raise her spirits,

reveal a reversal of roles which constrain Domenica to become a “parentified child.”<sup>93</sup> The term originated in the 1960s as “parental child” in psychology, specifically in the field of family therapy, from research on children growing up in the slums of New York who were treated by psychiatrists at the Wiltwyck School for Boys. In that context, “parental child” was coined to refer to “children who assume parental responsibility in the home as a result of economic and social conditions.”<sup>94</sup> The significance has since been expanded, along with the various possible terminology employed, to describe the phenomenon of children who find themselves as caregivers to their parents owing to a multitude of situations, including: medical conditions, disability, or mental illness of the parent(s), the latter being the case in Domenica’s mother; alcoholism or substance abuse by one or both parents; sexual abuse in which the child becomes a mate to a parent; divorce in which the family’s economic and support systems deteriorate; or, in cases of a conflictual marriage between the parents, when the child is forced into the position of counselor/therapist of one parent, another important element for Ali Farah’s protagonist. (Earley and Cushway 164) The common factor which unites the multiple origins and manifestations of the “parentified child” is that s/he is constrained to act as a parent (a “mate...confidant, friend or decision maker”) to his/her parent, which constitutes a “cross-generational boundary transgression,” that is, an inversion or breach of the typical “implicit and explicit rules and expectations that govern family relationships.” (Earley and Cushway 165) In short, physically and mentally healthy and financially stable parents (are

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<sup>93</sup> The term “parentified child” will be the preferred term in this study as it seems more current in psychological research. Synonyms that are utilized in the field include: “parental child,” “young carers,” “child as parent,” “child as caregiver,” or “child as mate,” the latter in the case of parental sexual abuse. In short, “parentified child” refers to a reversal of parental-child roles in which the child is obliged to care for the parent emotionally and/or physically, a process called “parentification,” which has a negative impact on the child’s own development as an individual. (Earley and Cushway 164-165, 167)

<sup>94</sup> Earley and Cushway credit the original use of the term “parental child” to Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman and Schumer in their *Families of the Slums: An Exploration of their Structure and Treatment*, Basic Books, 1967. In my study, I privilege “parentified child” as this seems to be the one of current use in psychology. (Earley and Cushway 164)

able to) provide care for their children which facilitates the child's developmental course toward adulthood, including identity formation; when the parents' health or socioeconomic well-being is compromised, children in the family frequently take on responsibilities of the parents which comes at a cost to their own development if the roles they assume are excessive or pathological in nature. This is the case in the heavy housekeeping tasks that Domenica takes on for her mother, in her perception that she must remake herself as the flawless daughter, student, and pianist in the hope of "curing" her mother from her melancholy, as well as her sense that she is obliged to provide psychological sustenance to her mother by becoming her confidant/counselor/therapist, at age ten nonetheless. For instance, a common topic of their conversations revolves around Domenica's mother paralytic depression which she attributes exclusively to the absence of her husband. The woman involves her daughter, inappropriately, in her troubles by continually lamenting about him and his shortcomings and all men in general, notwithstanding the fact that he is Domenica's father and the child is powerless to alter the situation:

La sua (del marito) inattendibilità mise in profondissima crisi mia madre...(lei) formulando le mille ipotesi che l'attanagliavano da anni, sulla presenza di altre mogli, altre amanti, altre esistenze...cascava inesorabilmente nelle trappole che le tendeva, per poi tornare sconfitta a lamentarsi dell'inaffidabilità dei somali e in generale della crudeltà degli uomini. (Ali Farah *Madre* 248, my insertion)

[His (her husband's) unreliability put my mother in the deepest crisis...(she) formulated the thousand hypotheses that gnawed at her for years, about the presence of other wives, other lovers, other existences...she inexorably fell into the traps that he held out for her, to then return defeated and complain about the untrustworthiness of Somali men and the cruelty, in general, of men.]

In their extensive review of the literature on the "parentified child," Earley and Cushway (2002) focus on the "pathologizing effects of parentification" on the child's development. (Earley and Cushway 170) The harmful impacts of parentification depend on: the age at which the child assumed the role of caregiver for the parent, at ten years old in the case of Domenica if her prior role as her mother's translator is excluded, and whether the role is "developmentally appropriate."

Regarding the latter factor, Earley and Cushway rank the tasks imposed on the parentified child as existing on a continuum, noting that “emotional caregiving,” as in the case of Domenica and her mother as evidenced by the previously cited passage, is significantly more detrimental on the child’s personality development and future relationships than practical caretaking, for instance, when a child performs household chores.<sup>95</sup> (Earley and Cushway 164,170) The “pathologizing effects” of parentification on the child can be framed in three large categories: affective disturbances (resulting in depression and anxiety); disturbances in the child’s own development, particularly in identity formation; and setting an unhealthy pattern for future significant relationships. Each of these effects are relevant in the case of Ali Farah’s protagonist and will be treated individually in this analysis.

Before proceeding with the harmful effects on Domenica of the generational boundary dissolution between her and her mother, it is important to clarify that Ali Farah’s portrait of the woman does not demonize her nor frame her as an abusive mother. Instead she is presented as an ill, suffering woman: “la sua sofferenza...la sua malattia” [“her suffering...her malady”], a woman who was burdened with “un forte senso di colpa” [“a strong sense of guilt”], a woman who acted without awareness of the motivations or possible repercussions of her decisions on herself or on her daughter: “la sua inconsapevolezza” [“her lack of awareness”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 244-245) In fact, the text provides many details of the considerable shortcomings of Domenica’s father as well who was never present for his daughter: “Per molti anni mio padre tentò, o forse finse, di mantenere un rapporto (con noi), arrivando di tanto in tanto a mia insaputa, comportandosi come se fosse sempre stato presente.” [“For many years, my father tried, or perhaps pretended, to maintain a

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<sup>95</sup> To support these suppositions, Earley and Cushway cite the research of Jurkovic, Jessee, and Goglia: “Treatment of parental children and their families: Conceptual and technical issues.” *American Journal of Family Therapy*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1991, pp. 302-314. (Early and Cushway 170)

relationship with us, arriving every once in a while, unbeknownst to me, acting as if he had always been there.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 244) However, in reality, he was usually “fagocitato dal suo mondo e si rese quasi irreperibile.” [“absorbed in his own world and he rendered himself unreachable.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 248) Absent and disengaged paternal figures, as is the case of Domenica’s father, Taariikh, is a common theme in the writings of Ali Farah as well as in Igiaba Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia*, another story of the (mostly female) Somalian diaspora in Italy which will be discussed in the next chapter. As Taageere, one of the three protagonists, the only male narrative thread, of *Madre piccola*, explains in an attempt to excuse his own absentee fatherhood: “I padri vanno e vengono, è vero.” [“Fathers come and go, it’s true.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 200) Taageere, like Taariikh, is most notable for his void, for his failure as a man and as a father, a motif that takes center stage in Ali Farah’s subsequent novel, *Il comandante del fiume* (2014). In fact, the detachment of Somali men from their families after emigration and their inability to construct a new life outside of their homeland, as we verify in the cases of Taageere and Taariikh in *Madre piccola*, is confirmed by Nuruddin Farah in his collection of interviews, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000). Farah, a Somalian exile himself for more than two decades at the time he composed this work, presents a harsh judgment of his fellow male compatriots: he describes Somali women as “honest” and hardworking, who come to Italy and “use the work permit to be employed” in humble, manual labor positions even though they perhaps held positions of prestige in their homeland; instead, he frames the men as “layabouts” and “liars” who “enter into shady deals, selling their *soggiorno* [“stay permit”] to the highest African bidder.” (Nuruddin Farah 66) Many of the men Farah interviewed for his study spent their days sleeping, chewing *qaat*, an amphetamine substance, passing their time in coffee shops debating about the civil war in Somalia, and, when possible, freeloading from their industrious women. In one

interview, Farah speaks with Caaliya Muxammad, a respected school principal in Mogadishu who, after her immigration to Italy, works six days per week as a housekeeper in Italy to pay the transport of six siblings from Somalia to Europe or the United States at the “hefty sum of three thousand dollars for each.” (Nuruddin Farah 69) In addition to financing their immigration fees arranged through a costly, underground “carrier,” once they arrive in Italy, Caaliya houses and feeds her male siblings, who range in age from late twenties to early forties, while they refuse to work themselves nor do they contribute to the housework or cooking. Farah interrogated one of the brothers, asking why his sister should work a low-paying, humiliating job to support him, who was older and more educated, while he stayed at home idle: “He replied that he had never performed household chores or any menial jobs in his life, and that a part of him preferred the kind of humiliation he suffered at his sister’s hands to that at an Italian’s home.” (Nuruddin Farah 68-69) Caaliya, his sister, explains the differential adaptive styles for diaspora Somali men and women which she attributes to the “male ethos” that the men enjoyed in their homeland. (Nuruddin Farah 70) In no uncertain terms, she describes the Somali men of the diaspora as “worthless:”

No longer pampered with male power, especially now that everything is in a shambles because of the curse visited on our country, Somali men, compared to their womenfolk, have proven themselves to be worthless. After all, the cult of male supremacy has predominantly depended on an untruth: that in their self-centred way, men ruled the world. Bullies, brutes of the worst kind, sufferers from self-delusion, men have contributed less to the well-being of our societies. And whether men like to hear it or not, exile abroad, the difficulties inside, these have both shown the weak stuff of which our men are made. No longer the chosen heirs to temporal power, and no longer endowed with the benediction of being closer to God than womenfolk, the men (in exile) fall apart like toys a child has glued together. (Nuruddin Farah 72, my insertion)

In addition, Caaliya notes that many marital/significant relationships fall apart after immigration because the women are burdened with financial, household, and childcare responsibilities while the “lazybones” men “pontificate on matters of war and peace, which warlord is doing what to whom and when, and who is winning;” she blames rigid male-female sex

roles and “clan politics” for the “disempowerment” of Somali men. (Nuruiddin Farah 73,75) She observes that most frequently the male-female power dynamic changes after diaspora and that the old model becomes illogical, causing couples to separate. This was Caaliya’s experience as well and is replicated in the narration of Ali Farah’s novel, including Domenica’s parents, Barni’s relationship with her husband, and Taageere’s marriage with his first wife who divorced him because: “Non si è mai occupato di lei e neppure del bambino.” [“He had never taken care of her and not his son either.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 31) It is, in fact, Somalian clan warfare that engrosses Domenica’s (and Barni’s) father(s) instead of the welfare of his/their wife and child, as is also the case in Ali Farah’s subsequent novel, *Il comandante del fiume*. Thus, the void that Taariikh, Domenica’s father, leaves in his family augments his daughter’s already painful sense of alienation from significant family members and her isolation in the new environment in Rome. Moreover, his absence and disengagement aggravate his wife’s depression which weighs further on her daughter by placing the child into a caregiver role for her mother.

Regarding the pathologizing effects of “parentification,” or “parent-child boundary dissolution,” reversed parent-child roles are frequently associated with mood disorders, such as depression and anxiety as well as low self-esteem, particularly in female children. (Earley and Cushway 168, Jacobvitz and Bush 733, 737-738, Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz 2) Ten-year old Domenica feels compelled to function as “parentified child” *cum* housewife/psychotherapist/perfect student for her mother. Even though the text provides no evidence that the woman acts maliciously or intentionally, Domenica’s mother’s solitude, debilitating depression, and emotional dependence on her spouse comes at a steep affective price cost to her daughter, causing her to feel suicidal in middle school and to begin cutting herself:

Alla fine della terza media, pensavo già che la vita fosse abbastanza insopportabile da non valer la pena di essere vissuta. Ricordo quel periodo perché fu allora che emerse il problema dei tagli...cominciai a lavorare il mio corpo con perseveranza, procedendo alla completa rimozione di tutti i gesti, i comportamenti, gli odori, i colori che (la madre) potesse non riconoscere come affini ai propri. Volevo scongiurare il pericolo che le notazioni altrui sulla mia origine somala la facessero vacillare. Non so se mia madre si accorgesse di questi sforzi...Fu perché mi sentivo eccentrica e indefinita che cominciai a torturarmi la pelle? Credevo, forse, di poter separare con la lametta l'ambiguità della mia essenza? (Ali Farah *Madre* 244-245, my insertion)

[“At the end of eighth grade, I already thought that life was pretty much unbearable to not be worth living. I remember that period because that’s when the cutting problem emerged...I began to work my body with perseverance, beginning with the complete removal of all gestures, behaviors, odors, colors that (my mother) would not recognize as like hers. I wanted to ward off the danger that others’ observations on my Somali origin made her falter. I don’t know if my mother noticed my efforts...Was it because I felt eccentric and undefined that I began to torture my skin? Did I believe, perhaps, that I could separate with a blade the ambiguity of my being?”]

The author’s employment of the verb *lavorare*/to work her body is important here and indicates that Domenica pinpoints, at least unconsciously, the source of her distress to her skin which must be worked/altered, in other words, she somaticizes her emotional distress on her body. A young adolescent by now, in the third year of middle school around age thirteen or fourteen, Domenica no longer finds joy in living. Clearly, her depression is attributable in part to her mother’s lack of caretaking in her regards and the woman’s mental illness, yet Domenica’s psycho-affective suffering has multifactorial origins, which include: her isolation owing to the painful loss of the loving and supportive *groviglio dei fili* in Mogadishu, particularly Barni; her “blackness” per Wright meaning her social-political minoritization and alienation in the Italian context, causing her to have no friends at school or other support system; her perception of guilt for her mother’s sadness; and her “parentified child” role as her mother’s caregiver in order to ensure the family’s survival, thus guaranteeing her own. Domenica reasons (unconsciously, as she does not/cannot interpret her self-harm behavior until two decades later) that she can eradicate her own strangeness and “cure” her mother of her sadness by extirpating her own skin. Self-mutilation allows her to



eliminate the root cause of her own ambiguity and alienation, her skin,<sup>96</sup> and become more white/Italian/like her mother and everyone else in Rome and less black/strange/like her father: “Cambiare pelle, reincarnarmi...Occhi che bruciano, pianto in arrivo, gola annodata, singhiozzo asciutto...Ma io, piangere no, non volevo, piuttosto volevo sollevarmi la pelle...A incidermi, a vedere il colore del sangue.” [“Change my skin, reincarnate myself...Eyes that burned, imminent weeping, throat knotted up, a dry sob...But I, crying no, I didn’t want to, rather I wanted to lift off my skin...To carve myself, to see the color of my blood.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 99) Simone Brioni in *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in “Minor” Italian Literature* (2015) likens Domenica’s self-harm behavior to a “religious-like erase of her stigmatized *meticcio* skin as if it were impure and inherently associated with sin.” (Brioni 69) He links her self-mutilation to the phase of her identity development when she was trying to assimilate into her mother’s culture which was white and Catholic. Thus, carving away her skin allows her to expiate herself of her sin

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<sup>96</sup> Self-harm behaviors, also known as NSSI or “nonsuicidal self-injury,” are fairly prevalent among adolescents, especially girls. Hilt *et al.* define NSSI as “direct, deliberate destruction of one’s own body tissue without suicidal intent”. (Hilt *et al.* 63) Regarding gender, a large sample study of American students (N=665) by Barrocas *et al.* found that nearly four times as many girls self-harm as boys in adolescence: of the ninth-grade students in the study, 19% of girls engaged in NSSI, most typically cutting or carving themselves, compared to 5% of boys who commonly hit themselves. The lifetime rate of NSSI in this study was 8.0%, while other studies have documented between 17.0% and 23.2% for older adolescents. (Barrocas *et al.* 1, 4, 6) Another American-context study by Hilt *et al.* found that 56% of Hispanic and African-American adolescent girls from the ages of ten to fourteen have engaged in NSSI, however, the authors denied that there was an effect of ethnicity/race on NSSI. They documented “internal distress,” which was most commonly depression, and peer victimization/teasing as related to self-harm; importantly, close, positive friendships had a buffer effect against it which were non-existent in Domenica’s case. (Hilt *et al.* 63-64) Another study by Hawton *et al.* included social isolation, family adversity, maladaptive parenting, divorce, bullying, concerns about sexual orientation, perfectionism, substance abuse, depression, and anxiety among risk factors for self-harm. (Hawton *et al.* 2374-2376) This author was unable to find specific studies related to the racially-marginalized adolescent immigrant and “autolesionismo” [“self-harm”] in the Italian context, however, a reference from the Psychiatry and Psychotherapy Mental Health Agency in Bologna verified attempted suicides (AS) in adolescent immigrants to Italy as representing 41.2% of all AS in their clinic in 2010, a disproportionately high percentage given that the population of these children in Bologna was only 13.4%, which indicates the degree of suffering that immigrant children to Italy experience. (Poggioli *et al.*) It appears that Domenica had a multiplicity of risk factors for self-harm: social isolation, inadequate parenting, divorce in the family, depression, and the trauma of the immigration to Italy.

of blackness; in short, her skin in the Italian context is a “traitor” and as such must be “punished” by its excoriation, similar to the creation of a stigma in the religious sense. (Brioni 69)

Domenica’s “treatment” of her own depression by carving her skin is, unfortunately, a fairly common phenomenon in adolescent girls who are depressed.<sup>97</sup> Unlike boys who find it socially acceptable to “externalize” psycho-affective distress by acting out, either by becoming violent or abusing alcohol or drugs, girls tend to “internalize” psychological discomfort since they are typically socialized to be silent and turn their frustrations inward.<sup>98</sup> (Laye-Gindhu and Schonert-Reichl 448) Research in psychology and psychiatry has found that nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) behavior has a function, albeit harmful, by allowing the adolescent to “express, reduce, or distract (oneself) from feelings of loneliness depression, and/or emptiness, to release anger and tension, to punish oneself, to regain control, and/or to detach...(it is) a mechanism for regulating and coping with emotions.”<sup>99</sup> (Laye-Gindhu and Schonert-Reichl 448) These findings are confirmed and expanded by Hawton *et al.* (2012) who propose that self-mutilation has both an internal/psychological function which permits the adolescent to “escape from intolerable stress or situations,” as well as an interpersonal/social function as a “means of showing others how bad they feel.” (Hawton *et al.* 2374) In short, self-harm serves as a means to sublimate intolerable distress and functions as well as a cry to others for help. Since Domenica is powerless to alleviate her

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<sup>97</sup> For statistics on the phenomenon which vary by race and gender, see previous footnote. NSSI and suicide is also linked with non-heteronormative sexuality in adolescents. (Hawton *et al.* 2375)

<sup>98</sup> To support these claims, Laye-Gindhu and Schonert-Reichl cite research by N. Crick and C. Zahn-Waxler, “The Development of Psychopathology in Females and Males: Current Progress and Future Challenges,” *Developmental Psychopathology*, vol. 15, 2003, pp. 719-742. They cite also B. Leadbeater *et al.*, “Gender-Linked Vulnerabilities to Depressive Symptoms, Stress, and Problem Behaviors in Adolescents,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*,” vol. 5, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1-29.

<sup>99</sup> Laye-Gindhu and Schonert-Reichl quote the findings, among others, by Nixon *et al.*, “Affect Regulation and Addictive Aspects of Repetitive Self-Injury in Hospitalized Adolescents,” *Journal of American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, vol. 41, no. 11, 2002, pp. 1333-1341.

mother's melancholy, nor can she resolve her own loneliness due to her family situation, nor can she change being her social-political status in Italy where she is "reduced to her epidermis" per Fanon, the only tool at her disposition is to turn her suffering on herself: she carves off the guilty part of her essence, her skin.

**V. IDENTITY FORECLOSURE AND DIFFUSED IDENTITY: I=WE, I=HE, I=BLACK REFUGEE.**

Domenica's "cutting problem" would continue for the next twenty years, accompanied by paralyzing depression, and an inability to construct a valid, unique identity for herself. Throughout the narrative, there are no references to Domenica's mother's efforts to seek help for her anguished and disturbed child who was harming herself. The text doesn't reveal if the mother was aware of her daughter's self-mutilation, which seems unlikely as Domenica describes her forearms as "raginatele di segni sulla mia superficie" ["spiderweb traces on my epidermis"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 99) More likely, perhaps her mother felt powerless and/or was truly incapable of addressing her child's grave psychological problems given her own fragile state. Instead of attending to her daughter's cries for help, the opposite occurs: Domenica's mother abandons her young teenage daughter entirely to accept a job in Libya, leaving the girl alone in Italy with neither parent nor any other relatives or emotional support: "Al compimento dei miei sedici anni mia madre smise di pensare a me. Fece un concorso per andare a lavorare all'estero e mi lasciò la casa a completa disposizione, perché potessi concludere i miei studi: le sembravo sufficientemente matura per badare a me stessa." ["When I reached sixteen years old, my mother quit thinking about me. She entered a competition for a job to work abroad and she left the house to me at my total disposition so that I could complete my studies: I seemed sufficiently mature to her to take care of myself."]

(Ali Farah *Madre* 246) The definitive abandonment by her mother, “per lei ero una figlia morta. Una figlia morta senza lutto” [“for her, I was a dead daughter. A daughter who died and wasn’t mourned”], while she is a high school student nonetheless, spurs Domenica into further crisis, both in terms of her affect and her identity formation. (Ali Farah *Madre* 100)

Domenica reacts to her mother’s abandonment by beginning to “comportarmi in modo ossessivo” [“behave in an obsessive manner”], through annihilating the remaining Somalian aspects of her identity in unconscious endeavor to transform herself into a “true Italian” woman, in a desperate effort to win her mother’s regard and perhaps to assimilate into the cultural context in Rome. (Ali Farah *Madre* 246) Even in her mother’s absence, Domenica keeps the house scrupulously clean as is Italian custom, dresses in European clothing, and dogmatically adheres to Catholic doctrines even though her reality was that she had grown up with a form of syncretic religion by attending mass with her mother, but also reading the Coran and frequenting the mosque in Mogadishu. Domenica even becomes engaged to an Italian boy at sixteen, integrating herself so much into his family that they have Sunday lunch regularly with his family, make plans to marry, and their parents communicate with her mother on a regular basis. Only two decades later, as an adult, Domenica is able to comprehend her “obsessive” manner: “Fu la mimesi.” [“It was mimesis.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 246) “Mimesi” is a suggestive term with its etymology in the ancient Greek *μίμησις* meaning “imitation.”<sup>100</sup> Ali Farah seems to adopt it in the Platonic sense, that is, as an artistic reproduction of an ideal in that Domenica faithfully reproduces her mother’s archetype of upright white Catholic Italian womanhood via her habits, her choices, and her presentation of self as an unerring copy of her mother: “per non perdermi, avrei dovuto mantenere la bussola

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<sup>100</sup> [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mimesi-o-mimesi\\_%28La-grammatica-italiana%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mimesi-o-mimesi_%28La-grammatica-italiana%29/)

puntata su quei modelli cattolici con cui lei stessa (la madre) era stata educata da sua madre una generazione prima.” [“to not lose myself, I would have to keep my compass pointed at those Catholic models on which she herself (her mother) was brought up by her mother a generation prior.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 246, my insertion) In addition, the military and biological senses of “mimesis”<sup>101</sup> as a defense mechanism are hermeneutic in Domenica’s case: since her complexity (race, nationality, plurilingualism, syncretic religion, creole/mixed culture) is so “così meschinamente fuori posto” [“so horribly out of place”] in Rome, she adopts a different “coloring” (white Italian Catholic) by assuming an exterior persona consonant with the context as a survival tactic. Like a soldier or an animal who is under attack/predation, Domenica attempts to camouflage her ambiguity by blending in with the environment since her own multiplex identity marginalizes her: “Ho cancellato il somalo, rapidamente... Vicina a mia madre, lontana da mio padre. Dovevo disambientarmi rapidamente. Cancellare un territorio della memoria e costruirne uno nuovo... Ho vissuto mimetizzandomi.” [“I erased the Somali language, swiftly... Close to my mother, far from my father. I had to dis-integrate myself, swiftly. Erase one territory from memory and construct a new one... I lived camouflaging myself/adapting myself to the environment.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 98-99) Moreover, in the description of her “obsessive” behavior to remake herself as her mother, Domenica’s use of “bussola” [“compass”] seems particularly meaningful in the context of the struggle to consolidate her identity during adolescence: she is lacking direction and has no secure point of reference, having been abandoned by both parents at sixteen years old in a country where she is framed as a minority stranger notwithstanding her Italian citizenship and parentage and the

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<sup>101</sup> The Treccani Dictionary lists the military significance of “mimesis” as the second entry which means to “put on colors to blend in with the environment and escape attack by the enemy.” The biological connotation of “mimesis” is the third entry and has a similar meaning to refer to animals who change their color to match the surroundings and avoid predation. <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/mimetico/>

fact that she is a native-language Italian speaker. Given the lack of *exempla* of complex national, linguistic, racial female identities similar to herself that are available to Domenica, being isolated from her extended family in Somalia and those family members dispersed in the diaspora, Domenica adopts the unique model of a woman available to her: her depressed mother. The “mimesis” of her mother’s ill-adapted prototype is akin to another shading of the term, as a “theatrical representation:” Domenica performs white Italian femaleness by play-acting her mother’s aspects in terms of race, nationality, religion, marrying at a young age, and employing Italian dress and standards for housekeeping. Yet, not surprisingly, Domenica’s mother’s model is ego-dystonic<sup>102</sup> for her daughter, that is, alien and psychologically uncomfortable, not representative of her own experiences and heritage, and not consonant with her own much-later established complex, “messy” identity. It is not until two decades later that Domenica is able to construct her own novel sense of self as a Black Somalian diaspora woman who chooses to raise her son in Italy together with another woman, her elective sister/cousin, Barni, without depending on the presence or support of the child’s biological father.

Deriving their definition of “identity” from Erikson’s seminal work *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz (1993) define it as “the stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for as a contributing member of society.” (Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz 87) Consistent with other researchers in psychology, they view adolescent identity formation as a several years-long process that proceeds along a continuum of various

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<sup>102</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, “ego dystonic” is a psychiatric term coined by Freud which denotes “aspects of a person’s thoughts, impulses, attitudes, and behavior that are felt to be repugnant, distressing, unacceptable, or inconsistent with the rest of the personality.” <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/ego-dystonic>

identity statuses,<sup>103</sup> and which culminates in a “coherent and unified representation of self.” (Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz 87) They hold that two essential phases towards identity construction include “exploration” and “commitment:” first, identity exploration entails “an active search for information about options in various domains such as occupation, politics, religion, dating, and friendships, as well as experimentation with the ways this information relates to one’s self-concept;” then, “commitment” generally follows the exploration period and “involves choice, consolidation, and adherence to a particular set of values.” (Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz 87) Thus, a healthy identity construction in adolescence involves a period of experimentation during which the youth “tries on” a variety of possibilities for his/her academic, career, and relationship selves and personal belief systems, and only later, even years later, s/he selects and commits to those which best represent his/her internal psychological representation of self. However, it is important to remember Erikson’s *polis* in that the adolescent is limited in his/her options of identity by his/her social-political context. Moreover, backing and encouragement by the family is fundamental for the young individual while navigating the identity crisis. Grotevant and Cooper (1985) found that the parent-child relationship is highly influential in adolescent identity

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<sup>103</sup> Hammack notes that “identity status theory” derived in the 1960s from Marcia (“Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 5, 1966, pp. 551-558) who classified identity status based on “the dimensions of exploration and commitment.” Hammack explains the current use of Marcia’s model in which individuals are assigned to one of four identity statuses, “achievement,” “moratorium,” “foreclosure,” or “diffusion” based on the relative degree of exploration of various possible identities and commitment to a singular one. The ideal is dubbed as “identity achievement” in which the individuals have a “high degree of exploration but are committed to a particular identity in terms of occupation and ideology.” In other words, there was a significant experimentation phase in which the person tried on various possible identities (work, romantic partner, ideologies), but s/he was able to settle on a satisfying construct of self and commit definitively to it. “Moratorium” individuals, instead, are “high in exploration but low in commitment,” that is, they become stuck in the exploration phase and are unable to select and commit to a singular, coherent identity. Those in “foreclosure” have low exploration but commit early to one identity, usually closely resembling that of the parents’ ideology; that is, the exploratory phase is abbreviated and the individual prematurely commits to a self construct which is typically patterned after a model in the family unit. Lastly, the least consolidated identity status, “diffusion,” refers to those low in both exploration and commitment. (Hammack 18) Hammack observes that a tremendous amount of empirical research has been generated by Marcia’s conceptualization of identity statuses, but it has been criticized for its paucity in theory and its “limited attention” to the social-historical-political context which was essential in Erikson’s thesis on adolescent identity formation. (Hammack 19)

formation: if a youth perceives moral support on the part of the parents who are able to balance remaining emotionally close to their child while simultaneously encouraging his/her autonomy and independence, then the parents' involvement is positively associated with the adolescent's ample exploration of possible educational and career paths. The contrary is true as well: they found that adolescents who had difficult communication patterns with their parents and/or if the parents themselves had a troubled marital relationship, the youth experienced more struggles in the construction of identity, particularly during the phase of exploration. Importantly, for adolescent males, communication patterns with the father were the most significantly related to identity exploration, yet for girls, interactions with both parents as well as the rapport between the parents themselves were important factors. They concluded that family relationships that encourage the adolescent's "individuality" while maintaining "connectedness" were the best "predictors of individual competence," that is, successful navigation of the exploration phase of identity construction.<sup>104</sup> (Grotevant and Cooper 423, 425, 426)

Therefore, as predicted by the research on adolescent identity formation, Domenica's abandonment by her mother during a critical period of her adolescence, the nearly life-long absence of her father, and her parents' own problematic rapport leads to predictable difficulty in her ability to construct a unique sense of self. Moreover, Domenica's unhealthy relationship with her mother, characterized by her "parentification" for her perennially depressed mother, is an obstacle in facilitating her autonomy and growth toward her own individuality. Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz established that girls are particularly vulnerable to generational boundary

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<sup>104</sup> Like much of the research on "identity statuses," Grotevant and Cooper's study was carried out with only white, middle-class, intact two-parent family households. In their own conclusions, they hold that "generalization should be made with caution." (Grotevant and Cooper 426) This author was unable to find any similar studies conducted in the Italian context with Black immigrant children, thus, there is much research to be done in this field.



dissolution, and that mother-daughter “role reversal, enmeshment, and overinvolvement” presents complications in the first step in solidifying one’s own unique identity, the exploration phase. (Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz 87) When the daughter and mother are unhealthily connected and/or have a relationship established as daughter-caregiver for the mother-child, the adolescent daughter most usually passes over the exploration period, or passes through it too quickly: she may only cursorily consider possible identities for work and love, and then prematurely commit to an identity which is frequently pre-fabricated for her by the family’s ideological model. Abbreviating or superficially passing through the identity exploration phase and hastily pledging oneself to a particular identity is known as “identity foreclosure.” Thus, the youth consigns him/herself prematurely to an identity based on the family mold and misses the opportunity to explore possible options that may be more well-suited to his/her temperament and capacities. (Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz 87) This is, in effect, what occurs in the case of Domenica: she “forecloses” her own unique identity exploration by assuming wholesale the paradigm of her mother (white, Italian, Catholic, committing herself at a very young age to a significant romantic relationship), partly in an attempt to please her mother and gain her affection, partly in an attempt to avoid censure from the *polis*, the social-political context which relegates her to a monolithic “black immigrant” identity, partly because she has no alternative (Black Somalian) female role models, and partly because she herself is traumatized and depressed from her experiences and has no familial support to sustain her during these delicate years:

...presi a comportarmi in modo ossessivo, indossando gli abiti impeccabili con cui le (alla madre) piaceva vedermi, cercando di mantenere la casa in quell’atmosfera quasi asettica in cui amava trovarla. Pensai che, per non perdermi, avrei dovuto mantenere la bussola puntata su quei modelli cattolici con cui lei stessa era educata...Fu la mimesi. (Ali Farah *Madre* 246, my insertion)

[“...I took to behaving in an obsessive manner, wearing impeccable clothing that she (the mother) liked seeing me in, trying to maintain the house in that aseptic atmosphere that she

loved finding it in. I thought, to not lose myself, I would have to keep my compass pointed on those Catholic models with which she herself had been brought up...It was mimesis.”]

Moreover, the text provides evidence that Domenica’s mother does not view her daughter as a separate person from herself, neither as a child to be nurtured and cared for, nor as a budding young adult whose possible scholastic, career, and relational options should be discussed, explored, and supported by her parents. The generational boundary dissolution between the two, which had its nascence in Domenica’s role as her mother’s translator in Somalia and was later greatly expanded to providing both practical and psychological caregiving for her mother after their suffered relocation to Italy, constitutes a toxic co-dependent rapport for both of them: their mother-daughter role reversal facilitates the mother’s dependence, allowing her to perennially avoid establishing an “autonomous life” for herself since her daughter provides for her emotional and practical needs. Likewise, their unhealthy, inverted parent-child relationship impedes Domenica from being unrestrained to explore and construct her own independent, ego-syntonic identity, separate and unique from that of her mother. The enmeshment between the two is so absolute that it constitutes the very absorption/incorporation of Domenica’s personhood into that of her mother’s. Domenica’s never well-constructed “I,” as demonstrated in her identity foreclosure at age sixteen by her “obsessive,” in her words, replication of her mother’s identity, eventually becomes completely consumed by her mother’s imposition of the personal pronoun “we:” “La prima persona plurale era d’obbligo...Mia madre la usava abitualmente quando si trattava di noi due, quasi fossimo una stessa essenza, un’identica volontà, un soggetto solo...(ero) sua estensione.” [“The first person plural was obligatory...My mother used it habitually regarding the two of us, almost as if we were the same essence, the same identical will, one single subject...(I was) her extension.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 249, my insertion) The complete disregard of Domenica’s individual personhood by her mother is most vividly demonstrated when Taariikh, her father,

suddenly reappears in Italy after a many years' absence when his daughter is nearly grown, a university student. As always, he makes grandiose promises to his wife and daughter, expressing his desire to reunite the family in Mogadishu and he even purchases airline tickets for them to return "home." Yet, Taariikh returns to Somalia soon thereafter and, as is typical in his absentee role as a husband and father: "si rese quasi irreperibile. Telefonava di rado, non dava quasi segno della sua esistenza, né di quello che era sembrato un suo progetto (cioè riunire la famiglia) ." ["he made himself nearly untraceable. He called rarely, he gave nearly no sign of his existence, neither of what had seemed his plan (to reunite the family)."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 248, my insertion) In order to authenticate the sincerity of his proposal or, more selfishly, to simply track down his whereabouts and his relational status with other women, Domenica's mother sends her daughter in her stead to Somalia: "cosa ci veniva a fare lei, europea, in un paese sull'orlo del collasso, cercando un uomo effimero?" ["what would she come there to do, a European, in a country on the brink of collapse, searching for an ephemeral man?"] (Ali Farah *Madre* 248) Thus, her mother knowingly sends her twenty-year old daughter into a war zone as an apparently expendable extension of herself to pursue her capricious, untrustworthy husband, a man who has never been present for her nor for his own child. Demonstrating that Domenica's fragile "I" has been absorbed into "we," that is, mother and nearly grown twenty-year old daughter have been fused into a single entity and will, Domenica obediently departs for Somalia without protesting or questioning her mother, putting her own well-being in danger because this is what her mother, meaning she herself, has decided:

Accettavo di agire in nome di questo soggetto plurale ("noi") senza troppo interrogarmi se quello che facevo corrispondesse davvero ai miei desideri. Fu per questo che accettai di partire (per la Somalia) come avanguardia volitiva di mia madre, perché desideravo farmi filtro per lei, ancora, per sempre. (Ali Farah *Madre* 248, my insertions)

[“I accepted acting in the name of the plural subject (“we”) without asking myself too much if what I was doing truly corresponded to my own desires. For this reason, I accepted to depart (for Somalia) as the volitional advance guard of my mother, because I desired to act on her behalf, still, for always.”]

The fact that Domenica’s mother sends her into a battle zone to track down her errant husband and her daughter accepts unquestioningly doing her mother’s bidding “still” and “for always” demonstrates incontrovertibly that Domenica has ceased to exist as a separate ego, both for herself and for her mother, and has become assimilated into the psyche and will of her mother, yet as a disposable component of such. Domenica’s mother’s complete disregard of her daughter’s well-being is demonstrated when she never materializes at the airport in Rome to check on her child’s safety: upon Domenica’s arrival in Mogadishu, she encounters civil war in full progress and is forthwith sequestered by her male cousin, Libeen; for her safety, he escorts her immediately back to Italy where her mother does not present herself at the airport to check on her daughter’s welfare. It is in this moment that Domenica realizes the malady in her and her mother’s life-long pact to act as one being and she has a quasi-nervous breakdown in the airport’s bathroom:

In quell’istante, in quel luogo, mi sentii per la prima volta invadere dal rancore...Andai in bagno, piansi tutto quello che avevo da piangere, mi strappai i capelli e fu allora che ricominciai, con le forbicine per le unghie, a tagliarmi. Quel giorno smisi di versare lacrime. Da allora, fui di nuovo in grado di piangere solo molti anni dopo...Questo evento segna l’inizio della mia esistenza da profuga di guerra... (Ali Farah *Madre* 251)

[“In that instant, in that place, I felt for the first time invaded by resentment...I went into the bathroom, I cried out everything that I had to cry, I ripped out my hair, and it was then that I began again, with nail-cutting scissors, to cut myself. That day I stopped crying. From that moment, I was able to cry again only many years afterwards...This event marked the beginning of my existence as a refugee of war...”]

Thus, it is not until Domenica is twenty years old, when her mother knowingly dispatches her to a combat zone for spurious motivations and then fails to confirm the welfare of her daughter by meeting her upon re-entry to Italy, that Domenica realizes the cost of the first person plural pronoun “we” as an imposed identity. She has a psychological crisis which manifests as resuming

the self-mutilation for the next decade. In addition, Domenica suffers a sort of elective hysteria in which she refuses to speak, an outward manifestation of her inability to speak as a singular “I” via expressing her own will for the prior two decades: “Quando decisi di seguire Libeen (il cugino) e di ignorare mia madre, cessai di parlare...usassi il silenzio come arma...era un silenzio volontario, consapevole.” [“When I decided to follow Libeen (her cousin) and to ignore my mother, I ceased speaking...it was as if I used silence as a weapon...it was a voluntary, conscious silence.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 252-253) In the failure and absence of both parents, having discovered by her mother’s indifference towards her safety that the previous “we” identity has proven to be bankrupt, and lacking a solid sense of “I” as a “compass” or point of reference to direct her decision-making process, Domenica aligns herself with her cousin, Libeen, who upon his entry in Rome is an undocumented Somalian war refugee.

For the following ten years, Domenica becomes Axad, a Black Somalian asylum-seeker, following her cousin, Libeen, all over the world, immediately departing from Italy for the Netherlands, then London, then Finland, then Germany, and lastly the United States, beginning a “vita di diaspora, peregrinazioni senza destino” [“a diasporic life, wanderings without destination”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 98) As part of her new acquired/foreclosed identity, as she did previously with the performance of her mother’s, Axad dispenses with Italian, she “re-exhumes” Somali language as well as absorbs the multitude of tongues of the places she passes through. With her undocumented cousin, Libeen, Domenica becomes like him a Somalian nomad with: “l’assenza di progettualità, la mancanza di mete.” [“the absence of planning, with no particular destination”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 251) Moreover, she casts off one identity, the foreclosed “we” identity that she was compelled to share with her mother as a white Italian Catholic woman, and remakes herself again, not in her own unique sense of “I” via a self-directed phase of exploration,

but in the image of a traditional Somalian Muslim woman in order to please Libeen. With her cousin, Axad commences an ambiguous amorous relationship which consists principally of his absolute authority over her: “Lui mi dominava...Mi manovrava...” [“He dominated me...He manipulated me...”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 106, 112) Libeen censures Axad constantly, criticizing her clothing, makeup, dancing, cigarette smoking, and poor choice of friends acquired by her years of living in Europe, calling her *gaal*, like her white Italian mother, implying by extension *sharmuuto* [“prostitute,” “loose woman”]: “Tu fai come le *gaal*...Il corpo non ha valore...Coprila (la schiena). Mettiti un *garbasaar*...Finché sei con me non devi lavorare.” [“You act like the white, European women...The body has no value...Cover it up (your back). Put on a shawl that conceals you...As long as you’re with me, you don’t have to work.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 104-105, my insertion) Since Axad does not adequately conform to his conception of Muslim standards for female sexuality, dress, behavior, and religious observance, he shames her, imputing her with the “sins” of her mother and all Western women: “Si vede che tua madre è una *gaal*...Mezza bianca che non sa come ci si comporta.” [“One can see that your mother is a *gaal*...A half-white who doesn’t know how to behave properly.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 103) Thus, the “black immigrant” image that had been imposed on Axad in Rome by the *polis* and the diametrically opposed “we” identity she was compelled to assume in her parentified rapport with her mother (upstanding white Italian Catholic) is substituted by another preconceived negative identity: Libeen inscribes Axad with the simulacrum of the infidel European white woman of questionable sexual mores, the stereotype of “le mulatte sono delle poco di buono” [“mixed race women are a bad lot”]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 202) Given that Domenica/Axad does not have her own “unique sense of self”, that is, she doesn’t know who is the “real me” as philosopher William James defined identity, she conforms to Libeen’s judgment of who she should be, as she did with her mother before: she dispenses with Western

dress, spends the day at home alone awaiting his return, adopts the Muslim veil, stops wearing makeup, ceases to frequent her more independently-minded female friends who he despises, and follows him aimlessly all over Europe and the United States as a refugee: “Oramai, il mio destino era il suo destino.” [“By now, my destiny was his destiny.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 98) Thus, Axad’s feeble “I” becomes “he” this time, meaning the will of Libeen: “Io accondiscendevo. Seguendolo, sempre.” [“I always acquiesced. Following him, always.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 107) Importantly, Axad repeats the same adverb here, “always,” that she adopted when describing the dissolved boundaries with her mother, when her “I” was “we.” Here, Axad employs “always” indicating that the “I”/“he” identity seems closed permanently to her, that is, her identity is foreclosed (again), committed to without exploration, yet this time as a rigorously observant Somalian Muslim woman who is dominated by her male partner in all aspects of her persona. Axad’s new “I” merely reflects the decrees of Libeen and the prototype woman that he had preconfigured for her. Unsurprisingly, like the former “we” identity which was a mimesis of her white Italian Catholic mother, also this preconfigured sense of self (subjugated Somalian Muslim woman in exile) is egodystonic for Axad and she recommences to carve herself to dissipate the psychological discomfort of her alien identity and social alienation: “Languivo: un dolore persistente da capogiro. Non mi dava tregua. La notte con gli occhi spalancati. Le ore passavano con quel rodimento come un piccolo scalpello che scava, minuziosamente, la carne.” [“I languished: a staggering, persistent pain. It wouldn’t give me rest. Nights with my eyes wide open. The hours passed with that gnawing away, like a little scalpel that, meticulously, dug away at my flesh.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 98)

Scholars of adolescent identity formation, psychologists Earley and Cushway, caution that, in addition to the psycho-affective pathological consequences of cross generational boundary transgressions which typically manifest as depression and anxiety, “parentification” establishes a

pattern for future rapports that continues into adulthood, particularly for female children. Known as “caretaking syndrome,” the child learns that his/her role in significant relationships is as a caretaker and/or as the obligatorily acquiescent individual in the dyad. If a child grows up with parent-child boundary dissolution, particularly those with more pathologizing effects such as providing emotional and/or sexual succor for the parent, s/he is led to believe that the “carer” role assumed in childhood is normal for intimate rapports, thereby casting the model for future unhealthy codependent relationships. In short, parentified children learn that subjugation of their needs, desires, and priorities to those of others is the norm in relationships.<sup>105</sup> (Earley and Cushway 168) This is, in effect, what occurs in Domenica’s, now Axad’s, rapport with Libeen. *Madre piccola* never provides evidence that Domenica/Axad rebelled against Libeen’s heavy criticism of her person and her comportment nor against his imposition of stringent codes on her. Moreover, she follows him unquestionably for years like an undocumented refugee even though she could have simply decided to remain in Rome after the disastrous reconnaissance mission for her mother in Somalia to track down her father’s whereabouts. Via the entrenched relationship with her mother during her formative years, Domenica/Axad had learned that her own will and even her very person were irrelevant which is the same model that governs her rapport with Libeen: “...per lui ero come pasta d’argilla da modellare. Ero la sua appartenenza. Dei miei passati poco gli importava.” [“...for him, I was like clay to model. I was his belonging. Of my pasts, he didn’t really care about that.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 103) In her “I” that had been transformed from “we” into “he,” Domenica/Axad’s complex origins and history as a Somalian-Italian with “messy,” complex linguistic and cultural identifications per Paul Gilroy, multiple suffered emigration-immigration

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<sup>105</sup> Here, Earley and Cushway support their claims by the findings of the study by Valleau, Raymond, and Horton: “Parentification and Caretaker Syndrome: An Empirical Investigation,” *Family Therapy*, vol. 22, no. 33, pp. 157-164. (Earley and Cushway 168)



movements between Somalia and Europe, and problematic or inexistent relationships with both parents are unimportant to Libeen: he does not consider Domenica/Axad's "origins" or "pasts" nor are they determinate in the decisions that he makes in regard to their lifestyle and movements. As with her mother who had ignored her arduous insertion into Italian schools as well as the pain caused by the loss of her father and other family members, or at least did not engage effectively with these difficulties, neither does Libeen contemplate Domenica/Axad's experiences and her complex identity. Instead, Domenica/Axad's "I" is subsumed into the rigid roles and rules that govern the rapport between the two which are determined by the volition, identity, and experiences of the counterpart individual in the relationship, Libeen in this case, and her mother during her childhood and early adolescence. Domenica's foreclosed identity of "he," like the prior "we," an identity to which she commits without exploring other possibilities, is a much suffered one and reconstructs her as a Somalian war refugee: "Mi manovrava" ["He manipulated me"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 112) Libeen's preconceived identity which he imposes on Domenica/Axad is as an observant Muslim, obedient Somalian woman who lives as a refugee. Like her prior foreclosed identity while under her mother's tutelage, it is an anguishing one:

Come profuga di guerra seguii il fluire di una diaspora...interiorizzandone le modalità, l'assenza di progettualità, la mancanza di mete. Ho peregrinato per quasi dieci anni, tra Europa e America, seguendo le mode che muovevano le masse dei giovani della mia età da un continente all'altro...Vivacchiavo: smarrita, dalla casa di un parente a quella di un altro, in cerca di protezione e di calore, sempre con una borsa mezza disfatta, una vita trascorsa collezionando aneddoti ed espedienti. (Ali Farah *Madre* 251-252)

["As a war refugee, I followed the flow of a diaspora...internalizing from this the ways (of living), the absence of planning, the lack of destinations and objectives. I wandered for nearly ten years, between Europe and America, following the trends which moved the masses of young people my age from one continent to another...I got by: (I was) lost, from one relative's home to another's, looking for protection and warmth, always with my suitcase half unpacked, a life spent collecting anecdotes and stopgaps."]

Domenica/Axad's brief summary here of the decade of her life from twenty to thirty years old clearly demonstrates a "diffused identity" defined by Erikson as a "loss of center and a dispersion."

(Erikson 212) As she reflects on those years, she does not identify any specific project or goal, nor even a reason for her various movements from country to country besides following first her mother, then Libeen. In another passage, she characterizes her wanderings as aimless and suffered, as a “vita di diaspora, peregrinazioni senza destino...disordinata è stata la mia vita.” [“a life of diaspora, roaming around without a destination...my life was disordered.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 98) Domenica/Axad’s “disordered life” mirrors her disordered ego: up to age thirty, she has no clear sense of self, neither as an individual psyche, that is, she lacks an internal “subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity...This is the real me!”, nor is she able to define herself as a contributing member of a significant social group, either as a worker or as a lover/partner to recall Freud’s definition of what constitutes a healthy personality. (Erikson 19, 136, 289)

## VI. LITERARY GENRE: INVERTED *BILDUNGSROMAN*

Domenica’s story, one of the three *fili*/narrative threads in Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola*, can be read as an inverted *Bildungsroman*, as a novel which recounts the (de)construction of the character of the protagonist. Traditionally, the coming-of-age novel recapitulates the decisive encounters and experiences during adolescence and young adulthood that result in the protagonist’s formation of a unique identity, both in regard to his/her psyche, the internal representation of self, as well as his/her social identity, typically in the spheres of education and profession, the choice of a life partner, and one’s affinity with specific religious, political, and world-views. Instead, Domenica’s story relates the undoing of her identity: from her secure, apparently idyllic childhood in Mogadishu where she conceives of herself as exclusively Somalian notwithstanding her “mixed” Italian-Somalian parentage, to the abrupt departure for Italy at age ten which fractures and dismantles her sense of self and necessitates its substitution with two foreclosed identities: first, that of her mother as a white, Italian Catholic woman, the second as a Black Somalian Muslim

refugee which is imposed on her by her cousin-romantic partner, Libeen. However, neither of these simplified, standard identities are ego-syntonic for Domenica/Axad; instead, they result in depression which she somaticizes by self-mutilation, and in a decade of aimless geographical wandering which is a clear metaphor for her diffused/confused identity. She drifts confusedly for twenty years, both literally and existentially, as a “mescolat(o) viaggiator(e)” [“mixed-up traveler”], as a “bolla di sapone trasportata dal vento” [“a soap bubble carried around by the wind”]: first, she passes the decade from age ten to twenty years old as a minoritized “Black immigrant” child/youth in Rome who simultaneously tries to mime/perform the identity of her white Italian Catholic mother, and the successive decade as a stateless Black Somalian Muslim refugee subjugated to the whims of her domineering partner. (Ali Farah *Madre* 97) The etiology of Domenica/Axad’s diffused identity (and accompanying depression and self-mutilation) commences at age ten with her immigration to Italy which abruptly deprives her of the sustaining *groviglio dei fili*, the affirming network of familial bonds. Domenica/Axad’s alienation and malaise with its origins in the fracture with her previous homeland, language, cultural context, and family is further exacerbated by her perceived strangeness in Italy/Europe and the “parentified child” relationship that she has with her mother. Moreover, Domenica’s suffered search to consolidate a valid and coherent sense of self (which would take into account her complex race, ethnicity, culture, linguistic abilities, and syncretic conceptualization of religion) is heightened by her own mother’s race, nationality, depression, and lack of independence from a wayward husband. Through her very identity, *gaal* [“white, non-Muslim, European/Italian”], Domenica’s mother alienates her own daughter, that is, renders her child strange and alone: the mother does not/cannot provide a strong female role model of Black, Somalian-Italian, plurilingual womanhood for her daughter. Given her own race and nationality, Domenica’s mother cannot provide a point

of reference for Domenica/Axad in navigating her own complex “meticcica” [“mixed ethnicity”] identity in Rome. Additionally, Domenica’s missing, seemingly irresponsible father and her mother’s depression, emotional dependence on her absent husband, and detached parenting style, at least as experienced by the protagonist, leaves Domenica without parental support and encouragement during the difficult phase of identity construction, especially as a racially and minoritized youth in Italy. It is not until she reconnects with her cousin, Barni, that she is able to construct a healthy, affirming life/home/identity for herself in Europe, notwithstanding her Italian mother and passport.

Unfortunately, the profound sense of loss and alienation which scars Domenica for years is commonplace for “foreign” children who migrate to Italy. Ivana Bolognesi, scholar of intercultural pedagogy, notes that a migration experience: “incide profondamente nella dimensione esistenziale e psicologica delle persone coinvolte...Ci sono persone che avendo subito un’emigrazione da bambini, ne avvertiranno le conseguenze per tutta la vita.” [“carves deeply in the existential and psychological dimension of the involved persons... There are individuals who, having undergone an emigration while they were children, perceive the consequences for the rest of their lives.”] (Bolognesi 2, 4) Bolognesi observes that children are most often not involved in the decision to emigrate, nor can they understand the motivations for such a drastic change, as was the case with Domenica who experienced the immigration to Italy as, significantly, a “tradimento” [“betrayal”] by her mother. Bolognesi notes that the first-generation immigrant, typically the parent, continues to identify with his/her original culture in the new host country: s/he tends to follow the same religious practices, language, and the norms of the homeland which govern the family, the roles between the sexes and between generations. Therefore, the home, even though in a foreign country, remains culturally a safe, familiar environment for the first-generation immigrants, usually the

parents. (Bolognesi 3) However, she observes that the migrant child has a much more complex and daunting task to confront in the new context since s/he cannot continue to exist as before, not even at home. Being immediately launched after migration into the Italian scholastic environment, the child faces a sense of “doppia appartenenza” [“double belonging”], first, to the original ethnic and national identity that typically exists only in the familial context after migration, and, then, to the Italian one which becomes the new social and scholastic point of reference. Most often, the child feels “scisso, combattuto, condannato a tradire sia la sua patria d’origine sia la sua patria d’adozione” [“split, torn, condemned to betray both his/her native land and his/her adopted land”]. (Bolognesi 5) Bolognesi argues that the migrant child has a sense of being “fractured” and runs the “rischio di non sentirsi effettivamente parte di nessun gruppo” [“risk of not feeling like part of any group”]. (Bolognesi 3) This is, effectively, what occurs in Domenica/Axad’s case: she is unable to successfully perform “white, Italian, Catholic” owing to her skin color and her complex linguistic and cultural background which qualify her in the Italian context as Other; moreover, this foreclosed identity rooted in her mother’s characteristics is not coherent with Domenica/Axad’s reality and sense of self. Additionally, due to her anguished migration from Mogadishu to Rome, Domenica/Axad lacks all contact with her Somalian family, depriving her of the significant relationships and potential role models on which she could construct a more consonant identity for herself. Thus, Domenica/Axad feels alienated, fragmented, and out of place in her new context: “così meschinamente fuori posto” [“so horribly out of place”], which explains the roots of her self-harm behavior, depression, diffused identity, and codependent relationships, all of which are symptomatic of her deconstructed sense of self. (Ali Farah *Madre* 99) Marie Rose Moro, scholar of ethno-psychiatry, pediatric psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst, notes that adolescent immigrants to Europe, like Domenica/Axad, are a group at heightened risk both for psychopathology and for

problematic identity construction. In her study, *Bambini immigrati in cerca di aiuto: I consultori di psicoterapia transculturale* [*Immigrant children in search of help: Consultants of transcultural psychotherapy*] (1998), she observes that: “La pubertà proietta brutalmente il figlio dell’immigrato in problemi insolubili di filiazione.” [“Puberty brutally thrusts the child of the immigrant into unresolvable problems of filiation.”] (Moro 96-97) Similar to Bolognesi’s conceptualization of “doppia appartenenza” [“double belonging”], Moro distinguishes between the two contrasting worlds of the immigrant child: that of “filiation,” the family group, and that of “affiliation,” the new cultural group. (Moro 89) Most often the filiation and affiliation universes are highly divergent and conflicting, not only linguistically, but also in social norms and mores. The migrant youth, thus, is at risk for “sfaldatura” [“splitting apart”] of his/her ego, as Moro puts it, unless s/he finds a support group and/or is able:

...inventare strategie di ‘meticciamento’ più o meno creative, più o meno dolorose...La ricerca della propria identità e la costruzione di coordinate narcisistiche ‘solide’ implica un complesso lavoro di elaborazione in relazione alla propria collocazione nell’ambito della filiazione, alla rappresentazione della famiglia e del suo percorso e, infine, alla ricostruzione paziente della stima di sé in un processo flessibile e sincretico. (Moro 97)

[“...to invent strategies of ‘cross-breeding/mixing heterogeneous elements’ more or less creative, more or less painful...The search for one’s own identity and the construction of ‘solid’ narcissistic coordinates implies a complex work of elaboration of self in relation to one’s own position in the family, to one’s representation of the family and its journey, and, finally, to the patient reconstruction of self-esteem in a flexible and syncretic process.”]

*Madre piccola* provides no evidence that Domenica/Axad had the opportunity or was ever encouraged or supported in exploring the various complex “coordinates” of her identity in order to elaborate her own unique sense of self. To the contrary, she was denied this possibility by her difficult relationship with her mother, the absence of her father, and the lack of support for doing so by her *polis*/community in Rome. Thus, Domenica grasps on to pre-fixed, foreclosed identities which were unsuitable for her and which resulted in depression and self-harm behavior, evidence

of her deconstructed ego and, thus, of Ali Farah's *Madre piccola* as an inverted *Bildungsroman* in the case of Domenica.

In a landmark longitudinal study on Black, Hispanic, and Asian American in the American context, Phinney and Chavira found that the additional factor of "ethnic or racial identity" was as "central identity concern" in adolescent identity construction in minority youth. In fact, constructing one's own affirming race and ethnic identity was the single most important domain in self-definition for young Black females.<sup>106</sup> (Phinney and Chavira 272) In their study, they applied the same model of four progressive identity statuses previously outlined<sup>107</sup> to the establishment of racial and ethnic identity: "diffusion," "foreclosure," "moratorium," and "identity achievement." They assessed the stage of racial identity of an adolescent by his/her degree of exploration of and his/her commitment to this domain. According to Phinney and Chavira, "achievement" of racial-ethnic identity is demonstrated by "secure commitment to one's group, based on knowledge and understanding obtained through an active exploration of one's cultural background" and is associated with "psychological well-being." (Phinney and Chavira 272, 273) On the contrary, an unexamined ethnic-racial identity, a "diffused" one, is associated with low self-esteem in these youths, and seems to indicate a passive acceptance of the "negative stereotypes," or "caricature identities" to use Erikson's term, which are attributed to their race-

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<sup>106</sup> In these assertions, Phinney and Chavira depart from the prior work of Phinney and Alipuria, "Ethnic Identity in College Students from Four Ethnic Groups," *Journal of Adolescent Research*, vol. 13, 1990, pp. 171-183, as well as the study by Aries and Moorehead, "The Importance of Ethnicity in the Development of Identity in Black Adolescents," *Psychological Reports*, vol. 65, 1989, pp. 75-82. These findings are confirmed in Phinney and Chavira's paper as cited in my analysis.

<sup>107</sup> Phinney and Chavira describe the four identity statuses, similar to Hammack's previously outlined definitions, as: "diffusion" which is characterized by "absence of both search and commitment" to an identity; "foreclosure" is distinguished by "commitment (to an identity) with search;" "moratorium is noted by "current involvement in identity search;" and "identity achievement" is "demonstrated by a clear commitment that follows search." (Phinney and Chavira 271)

ethnicity by the hegemonic societal-political groups. In addition, an incomplete, diffused racial identity seems seminal in overall problematic identity achievement: that is, if a minority youth, especially a female, does not address adequately her racial-ethnic self, then her general ego construction is negatively impacted as well. (Phinney and Chavira 280) Importantly, the role of the family was demonstrated to be fundamental in the process of exploring racial identity for minoritized adolescents:

The participants who progressed over the 3-year period had...higher scores on social and peer relations and on family relations. The participants who regressed were notable for their low scores on family interactions. Strong support from the family may be an important resource for minority youth as they explore their cultural heritage. (Phinney and Chavira 279)

In the case of Domenica/Axad, her traumatic migration to Italy deprives her of positive, strong (Black Somalian) role models for exploring her sense of race and ethnicity: she is separated from her father for most of her childhood, as well as her cousin who is like a sister to her, Barni, her Aunt Xaliima, and other relatives. Given that she spends her adolescent years with her depressed Italian mother in Rome, Domenica/Axad lacks the “family relations” and the “strong support from the family” cited by Phinney and Chavira as fundamental foundations from which she can determine her own sense of race and ethnicity. Nor is she emotionally or even physically sustained by either parent during the period of crisis when an adolescent would typically be confronting these important aspects of her identity. To use Moro’s language, Domenica/Axad’s “filiation” support is nearly non-existent, having little to no contact with her extended family nor her parents, particularly after her mother abandons her when she is sixteen years old. Moreover, Domenica’s “affiliation” opportunities in her new universe in Italy are compromised given her ambiguous race and perceived liminal nationality status. Thus, it is comprehensible that Domenica/Axad desperately latches on to any available port in the storm, first her mother during childhood, then her cousin Libeen, to construct a fragile, ego-dystonic self concept.



**VII. IDENTITY CONSOLIDATION AND HEALING FROM POSTCOLONIAL PATHOLOGY VIA SURROGATE (BLACK, SOMALIAN) MOTHERHOOD/ELECTIVE SISTERHOOD:**

A turning point occurs when Libeen sends Domenica/Axad away to live with his sister in London when he becomes involved with another woman, a divorcee nonetheless demonstrating his hypocrisy when one considers the rigid religious and gender role expectations that he enforced on Domenica. When she is freed from Libeen's domination of her, Domenica is free to encounter other women of the Somalian diaspora dispersed in Europe like herself. In the void of filial/familial points of reference, these women provide important alternative models of (Black, Somalian, complex) femininity on which Domenica/Axad can construct a sense of self which is ego-syntonic, that is, consonant with her experiences and reality. First, she meets Ayaan, "l'indiavolata" ["the devilish girl"]: a woman who "lavorava...(era) una donna indipendente...una donna libera, viveva il piacere e il suo corpo senza tabù. Non c'era squallore nella sua disinvoltura. Era lei a usare gli uomini." ["she worked...(she was) an independent woman...a free woman, she lived pleasure and her body without taboos. There was no squalor in her nonchalance. It was she who used men."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 108, 109, 110, my insertion) Ayaan refutes her husband after he endeavors to force her to conform to his notion of a proper, obedient Muslim woman: he demands that she quit her job, even though he himself did not care to work and he stays home all day chewing *qaat*, and he insists that Ayaan veil herself. Instead, she casts him out of the house and divorces him: "Non era una tipa da farsi intimorire." ["She wasn't a type to let herself be intimidated."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 111) Through her friendship with Ayaan, Domenica/Axad is exposed to a different model of femininity and a divergent paradigm for how relationships between men and women can be governed in comparison to the model of womanhood provided by her mother and the rapport between her parents and her own with Libeen. Ayaan's figure of free, strong female sexuality and

independence, as a Somalian Muslim woman living in Europe nonetheless, allows Domenica/Axad to reformulate her own notions of love and significant relationships which had been founded on the dependent, frustrating marriage between her parents and her own love story with Libeen which required the subjugation of her person. Enlightened by Ayaan's example, Domenica/Axad refutes these prior models of "love":

Io avevo finito con il pensare dell'amore che è pura dipendenza. Quello che la gente chiama amore, intendo. Dipendenza mentale, dipendenza fisica, quello che vuoi. Perché ho visto tante di quelle cose. Ma la rinuncia—lasciare da parte qualcosa di nostra, qualcosa a cui teniamo molto—questa l'ho vista di rado. (Ali Farah *Madre* 125)

["I had finished with thinking of love as pure dependence. What people call love, I mean. Mental dependence, physical dependence, whatever you want to call it. Because I had seen a lot of that. But renouncement—leaving behind something that is ours, something that we hold very important—that I had rarely seen."]

Ayaan provides a strong, one could say feminist, example to Domenica/Axad: she lives her sexuality according to her own terms, not according to stringent, pre-conceived Catholic/Muslim/societal norms, and she recognizes her own authority in accepting or refuting her rapports with men, as well as defining the conditions of those relationships. The clear contrast of Ayaan's model with Domenica's mother as well as numerous other minor female characters in the novel who suffer greatly in their marriages at the subjection of their husbands permits Domenica/Axad to reconceive her own acceptable parameters for love and marriage: "ero arrivata persino ad accettare l'idea del matrimonio come contratto...pensavo—figurati un po'—che l'amore non è un ingrediente fondamentale per il matrimonio" ["I had even come to accept the idea of marriage as a contract...I thought---think about this a bit—that love was not a necessary ingredient for marriage"]. (Ali Farah *Madre* 125) She makes a conscious decision that, for her own future relationships with men, she will not "rischiare di amare a dismisura" ["risk loving exaggeratedly"] as her mother had before her; she will not accept living love as a mental illness

nor as a rapport that comports suffering or alteration of her very self. (Ali Farah *Madre* 135)

Domenica puts this new philosophy to practice when she marries Taageere, a Somalian conational, in the United States at age thirty and immediately becoming pregnant; yet, when she discovers that her new husband has failed to inform her of his prior marriage and the fact that he has a child with another woman, ostensibly so that he can obtain documents and entry to Europe through her Italian citizenship, Domenica/Axad does not become desperate or catatonically depressed like her mother. Instead, she leaves Taageere behind in America, not divorcing him, but allowing him to decide his own fate and how he wants to confront his responsibilities as a father and husband both in her regards and towards his other son. Pregnant, Domenica returns to Italy where she raises her child together with her elective sister/cousin Barni without pining over Taageere or lamenting and fixating on her misfortune, as did her mother before her:

Mio marito forse ci raggiungerà, forse no. Non me ne preoccupo, desidero che sia lui a determinare il suo futuro. Ho capito, a mie spese, che la premura eccessiva uccide l'animo delle persone. È ciò che è successo a mia madre...Deve essere diversamente, ora lo so. L'amore deve essere autonomo, non di protezione. (Ali Farah *Madre* 257)

[“Perhaps my husband will reach us, perhaps not. I’m not worrying about it; I want him to determine his own future. I figured it out, at my own expense, that excessive concern kills the soul of people. It’s what happened to my mother...It has to be different, now I know. Love has to be autonomous, not about safeguarding.”]

In addition, to developing her own conceptualizations of love and marriage which break with the prior archetypes known to her, it is during the same period, while she is living with Ayaan, that Domenica/Axad starts working: first, she utilizes her Italian linguistic skills as a waitress in a pizzeria in the Netherlands, later she follows a course on filmmaking. By chance, she meets a fellow compatriot in Germany, Saciid, who is shooting documentaries on the Somalian diaspora who are scattered all over the world. At first Axad serves as his assistant, but later she independently produces her own film projects of Somalian refugees: “Io che avanzavo negli anni,

tentando disperatamente di ridefinirmi, finalmente trovo...un obiettivo.” [“I, who was getting along in years, trying desperately to redefine myself, finally, I found...an objective.”] (Ali Farah *Madre* 121) It is at this point, via her documentary film work of other like herself, that Domenica/Axad begins to decide her own movements and make her own plans, no longer blindly following others who determine her destiny and her very identity. Significantly, she equates *ridefinirmi* [“to redefine myself”] with meaningful work here, implying that for the Black diaspora woman (or anyone for that matter) a purposeful profession that is consonant with one’s sense of self is constitutive in creating that same identity, similar to Freud’s conceptualization of the healthy ego as one who “‘Lieben und arbeiten’ ” [“Loves and works”].

In addition to devising her own acceptable parameters as a lover and as a worker, having been positively influenced by the examples of mostly Somalian diaspora women who live in Europe and who have navigated successfully their own complex identities in that context, Domenica/Axad invents her own standards for motherhood which are greatly divergent from her own mother’s model. She is inspired by Black Somalian women who, notwithstanding traumatic migrations to a multitude of European countries with children in tow and arduous economic and social conditions, lovingly and responsibly care for their children even when they have been abandoned by their husbands. For example, Shamsa:

...ne aveva tanti di bambini e nessuno l’aiutasse...il marito che sparisce senza preavviso...Shamsa era una meraviglia, non di quelle madri che la mattina urlano come ossesse perché i bambini si sbrighino. Ne ho visto tante. Lei cantava. Cantava e parlava con voce bassa. Senza rimproveri: i bambini sapevano troppo bene che non potevano infierire su di lei. Si muovevano delicatamente. (Ali Farah *Madre* 114-115)

[“...she had a lot of children and no one helped her...a husband who disappears without warning...Shamsa was a marvel, not one of those mothers who scream like a demon in the morning so that the children will hurry up. I had seen a lot of those. She sang. She sang and spoke with a lowered voice. Without scolding: her children knew very well that they couldn’t get angry with her. They got ready carefully.”]

Shamsa's model of loving, capable maternity, notwithstanding a failed marriage and an absent father figure for the children, impresses Domenica/Axad and furnishes an alternative to her own depressed, distant mother. Additionally, she cites the dramatic example of Caasha, who walked from Mogadishu to Kismaayo, 483 kilometers, with four small children in tow ranging in age from one to six years old. Caasha saves her children's lives during the civil war in Somalia and establishes an independent life in Holland with them, awaiting like a saint for her husband who required eight years to reach his family. (Ali Farah *Madre* 124) And, indubitably, the *habaryar*, the little mother/maternal aunt Xaliima in Mogadishu, who lovingly cared for Barni after her mother's apparent suicide, furnishes the original archetype on which Domenica will raise her child together with her cousin.

Indeed, Domenica/Axad's impending maternity is the impetus that incites her on the definitive path toward construction of self and healing from depression: she enters psychotherapy and, as a final culminating step, documents her story. The last chapter recorded by Domenica in *Madre piccola* is a letter of gratitude to her therapist which consists of a brief autobiography of her "percorso esistenziale complesso" ["complex existential itinerary"], an instrument which will enable her to "affrontare con integrità il ruolo di madre che oggi mi compete...Una madre non può rischiare di essere scissa." ["to confront with integrity the role of mother which I am now taking on...A mother cannot risk being split."] (Ali Farah *Madre* 223) Importantly, she signs the letter as "Domenica Taariikh," the first time in the narrative that she employs this moniker; it consists of the Christian name conferred on her by her mother, no longer vacillating between Domenica and Axad, as well as the surname which is her father's given name as is the custom in Somalia. The hybridized name symbolizes Domenica's definitive identity which incorporates both "halves" of her history, her experience, and her métissage parentage, race, and nationality: Domenica Taariikh

represents her hard-won novel, coherent, and affirming identity. Moreover, unlike her mother who believed that isolating, single motherhood was sufficient to raise her daughter, Domenica returns to Italy to bring up her son together in an elective family that she establishes with her cousin, Barni. Even though their original family support network, the *groviglio dei fili*, has been disrupted and destroyed by civil war and their diaspora experience, Domenica and Barni provide mutual support and affirmation via reattaching broken familial bonds, when possible. Their newly configured *groviglio* also furnishes a firm point of reference for little Taariikh, Domenica's newborn son whom she names for her father. *Madre piccola* terminates where it began, with a newly formed family safety net, however reduced in size and complexity it may be, to sustain and nurture the next generation. As Barni affirms:

Dentro la nostra casa io, Domenica Axad e il piccolo Taariikh troviamo conforto e riparo, piantiamo le nostre fondamenta per avere la forza di combattere, quotidianamente. Rimanere isolati non è più possibile, cerchiamo di adattarci e di ricostruire il nostro percorso. Convivendo, gran parte del dolore si compartisce. Una madre sola non basta ai propri figli, chi lo può sapere meglio di me e di Domenica Axad? Le nostre madri erano malate di troppe solitudini. Insieme ne verremo a capo, i figli si crescono in comunione. (Ali Farah *Madre* 263-264)

[“Inside our home, I, Domenica Axad, and the little Taariikh, we find comfort and refuge, we plant our foundations in order to have the strength to struggle, daily. Remaining isolated is no longer possible. We are trying to adapt ourselves and to reconstruct our own path. Living together, most of the pain is divided up. One mother alone is not enough for her own children. Who would know that better than I and Domenica Axad? Our mothers were ill from too much loneliness. Together, we will start over again. Children must be brought up in community.”]

In *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004), Michelle Wright builds on Michelle Wallace's framing of the Black female as the “Other of the Other.”<sup>108</sup> Wright conceptualizes the Black woman as “the negation of the negation” who disappears even in African/African-American counter-discourses. (Wright 139) Specifically, Wright exposes and

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<sup>108</sup> Michelle Wallace conceptualizes the Black female as the “Other of the Other,” meaning the Other of the Black male, in her “Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity,” *Women, Creativity, and the Arts: Critical and Autobiographical Perspectives*, New York, Continuum, 1997. (Wright 139)

troubles the “erasure of Black women” in the counter-discourses against racism developed by W.E.B. Du Bois, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon: she argues that these prominent theorists unanimously founded their notions of Black subjecthood on gender, as exclusively male, ignoring the biological, life-giving role of the Black woman for all Black subjects, as well as for other types of racially marked bodies such as the ambiguous “meticcias” [“mixed race”] bodies of Carla Macoggi’s and Ali Farah’s protagonists. Additionally, Wright critiques the fact that the aforementioned scholars establish Black subjectivity within the ideal of the Western European nation-state which panders to Hegelian notions of space and time: according to Wright, Fanon *et al.* argue that the Black Other can/must become a Subject within the imaginary ideal of the Western European nation which was constructed and is still reified by the binary opposition of Western European nation/African savage clan and by Hegel’s notions of “analytical,” “progressive” history in which Africa is conceived as a “prehistoric mist where time passes without any effect on space, and where progress and development have not occurred.” (Wright 136-137) As presented in the previous chapter of this study, Wright proposes the Black mother, instead, as a “new collective model for Black subjectivity.” Since the Black mother (literally) embodies the “Other of the Other,” being positioned outside the hegemonically-arranged binaries of white race, male gender, European nationality, and heterosexuality, she can serve as a dialogic, intersubjective reference point via which the Black diaspora individual can root his/her own subjectivity. (Wright 142)

Michelle Wright’s archetype of the Black mother, who incarnates the “negation of the negation,” uniquely situates her as a reference point, a “compass,” from which the Black child can establish his/her own subjecthood given that they share the same constructed ideals of race and nationality. On the contrary, Domenica’s mother’s whiteness, Italianness, and Catholicism render

her daughter different (and lesser) than herself, at least in the European/American context. Instead of furnishing a model on which her daughter can refer to in constructing her own identity, her mother renders her strange. Domenica describes herself in the narrative as: “mezza chiara” [“half white/light”], “italosomala” [“Italian-Somalian], “nata insieme, nata mescolata” [“born together, born mixed up”], “iska-dhal” [“mixed, born of parents of different races and nationalities”], her “messy” complex identity as Muslim-Catholic, plurilingual, Somalian-Italian, mixed race identity is framed as an aberrant inexplicable (non)being in Italy. (Ali Farah, *Madre* 95) Unable to locate an affirming reference point in her own depressed, white, Italian mother, the “mezzamista” [“half-mixed”] protagonist, Domenica, seeks this figure in other Black Somalian diaspora women like herself. Moreover, to raise her son in a healthy fashion, she elects a *habaryar*, a surrogate mother, a “little mother,”<sup>109</sup> her cousin Barni, an obstetrician nonetheless whose profession is to care for women and their infants. In the stead of an alienating, ill *gaal* mother who constrains her daughter to serve as a caregiver in childhood then abandons her, Domenica adopts the model of “sorellanza elettiva” [“elective sisterhood”] as the means via which she can fashion for herself a novel *groviglio dei fili* with another woman, a blood relative nonetheless, who has also been subjected to a traumatic migratory experience and to debasement based on race, nationality, and gender.

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<sup>109</sup> In an interview, the author confirms that the title of the novel pays homage to the Somalian term/concept for maternal aunt who functions as a second mother, a “litte mother,” thus, motherhood is a shared comunal activity: “Il titolo, *Madre piccola*, è il calco della parola somala *habaryar*: significa “donna piccola,” ma anche “madre piccola:” è un termine che si usa per chiamare la zia materna...Tutti vedono come “madre piccola,” la *habaryar*, Barni, la quale non è madre, in realtà, è una madre simbolica, un’ostetrica. Nella società somala, ma non solo, esiste un concetto di maternità condivisa, non legata strettamente all’esperienza della donna, ma partecipa anche da chi non è madre biologicamente. Nella diaspora, ciò consente alla donna di non crollare, di avere un punto di forza nel farsi madre, nel prendersi cura di qualcun altro.” [“The title, *Madre piccola*, is borrowed from the Somalian word *habaryar*: it means “little woman,” but also “little mother:” it’s a term that we employ for the maternal aunt...Everyone can see that “little mother,” *habaryar*, Barni, who is not a mother herself in reality, is a symbolic mother, an obstetrician. In Somalian culture, but not only, there exists the concept of shared maternity, not necessarily strictly tied to the (corporeal) experience of the woman, but she who is not a biological mother can also participate. In the diaspora, (these alliances between women, allow women to not collapse, to have a point of strength in being a mother, in taking care of someone else.” (Ali Farah “Parole” my insertions)



Through constructing a safe, edifying relational network founded on similar positionality and experiences, Domenica and Barni, who locate themselves as Black/mixed-race, diasporic Somalian women, find curative affirmation of their identity, worth, as well as a sense of belonging, notwithstanding the social-political context. In a 2006 interview, the author confirms that: “Qualche anno fa, durante un convegno, una relatrice algerina, rivolgendosi alle donne presenti, quasi tutte di origine Africana, fece un’affermazione che mi colpì molto: nelle società alle quali ognuna di noi apparteneva, l’individuo esiste solo in quanto parte di una collettività.” [“Several years ago, during a conference, a woman Algerian lecturer, addressing the women in the audience, almost all of whom were of African descent, made an assertion that struck me: in the societies to which each of us belonged, the individual exists only inasmuch as s/he is part of the collective.”] (Ali Farah “Poetics” 264) Thus, as reciprocal “Black mothers,” Domenica and Barni provide mutual succor and strength which allow them to sustain each other as well as the next generation, embodied by Taariikh.

### **VIII. CONCLUSION:**

Domenica Taariikh is traumatized by her migration from Mogadishu to Rome at ten years old which deprives her of her father, her beloved, extended family in Somalia, her country of origin, and one of her mother tongues. She spends the remainder of her formative years with an alienating, depressed mother who is unable to provide a strong (Black Somalian female) role model to her and whose mental illness even positions Domenica in a caregiving role to her parent. Moreover, in her new homeland, Domenica is framed as a racially-minoritized stranger, “così meschinamente

fuori posto” [“so wretchedly out of place”]. This combination of deleterious events during late childhood and adolescence result in a fragile sense of identity in Domenica and years of significant psycho-affective disturbance, which includes depression, self-mutilation, as well as subjugation of herself in an unhealthy love relationship. Domenica’s symptoms of “identity diffusion” are made evident by two decades of wandering as a refugee in Europe and the United States, with no particular goals, nor even exploration of possible career paths or healthy romantic rapports which respect her person. At age thirty, when she is pregnant with her first child, Domenica seeks remedy for her state of politically-induced depression and identity diffusion via a multi-pronged “treatment plan” which evolves over several years: she negates the *exemplum* of painful, unsatisfying marriage provided by her mother and father; she rejects rigid codes for female sexuality based on both Somalian-Muslim as well as Italian-Catholic mores; and she invents her own unique personal ideology of love and marriage: marriage as a convenient legal arrangement to raise children, but love without obsessiveness which permits her to retain her independence and, most importantly, conserve her child’s well-being and her own mental health. Through her relationships with other Black Somalian female members of the Somalian diaspora, Domenica conceptualizes her own *métissage* identity as a lover, as a worker, and as a mother. She rejects her mother’s model of depressed, isolated single motherhood and adopts those of loving, responsible mothers who care for their children through difficult political situations (war, refugee camps), even in the face of weak, absent, or abusive husbands. Most of all, Domenica finds strength and restoration of self through her relationship with a second/substitute mother, her cousin and “elective sister,” Barni. Barni incarnates Michelle Wright’s archetype of the Black mother, being Black, Somalian, loosely Muslim, a diaspora member in Europe. Through their “sorellanza elettiva” [“elective sisterhood”], Barni and Domenica provide mutual affirmation and strength, notwithstanding postcolonial

historical events in their homeland which is at the core of the isolation and alienation of the three narrative voices' experiences. (Ali Farah *Madre*, 240) As *habaryar*, little mothers for each other, Barni and Domenica reconstruct a new *groviglio dei fili* to sustain both themselves and little Taariikh who represents the next generation of the Somalian diaspora in Italy.

## “Narrative Identity:<sup>110</sup>

### Storytelling as Constitutive of Self in Igiaba Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia*”

“‘C’è papà qui dentro?’ chiedo. ‘Ci siamo noi’ disse Maryam Laamane (la madre). ‘Noi...che parola meravigliosa.’” Igiaba Scego<sup>111</sup>

‘Ma lei, la rana, non voleva morire. Non aveva ancora vissuto. Non si era ancora innamorata.’ Igiaba Scego<sup>112</sup>

“Even after release from captivity, the victim cannot assume her former identity. Whatever new identity she develops in freedom must include the memory of her enslaved self.” Judith Herman<sup>113</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *topos* of postcolonial pathology<sup>114</sup> is prevalent in several works of Igiaba Scego (Rome, 1974), prominent Italian author born in Rome to Somalian parents who sought political asylum as refugees of Siad Barre’s dictatorship.<sup>115</sup> This study will focus on one of her novels particularly

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<sup>110</sup> The development of the “narrative identity” thesis (1986) is credited to American cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner, who was “the first to emphasize the link between autobiographical narration and identity.” (Medved and Brockmeier 17) A reprint of his 1986 article is found in Jerome Bruner, “Self-making and World-Making,” in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* (2001). Briefly, the narrative identity thesis holds that the act of narrating is crucial in the construction of identity itself, that is, one’s notion of self derives from storytelling about oneself. This theory will be discussed in the last section of this study.

<sup>111</sup> “‘Is daddy inside here?’ I ask. ‘All of us are here,’ said Maryam Laamane (her mother). ‘Us...what a marvelous word.’” (Scego *Oltre* 451, my insertion) All translations from Italian to English are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>112</sup> “But she, the frog, didn’t want to die. She hadn’t lived yet. She hadn’t fallen in love yet.” (Scego *Oltre* 455)

<sup>113</sup> Quote from psychiatrist Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1997). Cited in Phillip’s and Daniluk’s study of childhood sexual abuse victims utilized in this project.

<sup>114</sup> This term is my adaptation of Ann Cvetkovich’s “political depression” as outlined in her *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). For an explanation of the use of this concept in regard to Scego’s novel, see the Introduction to this chapter as well as the Introduction to this study.

<sup>115</sup> Igiaba Scego is still frequently referred to as an im/migrant writer or a “G2” author (“Second Generation Italian”), a denomination she refutes since she was born in Rome and has lived there for her entire life. The term, im/migrant

relevant to the theme of historically and politically-engendered depression, *Oltre Babilonia* [“*Beyond Babylon*”] (2008). “Postcolonial pathology” will refer to the psycho-affective anguish suffered by Scego’s protagonists in their encounter with History which encompasses three historical moments in the novel: the period of Italy’s colonialism in Somalia (1905-1947);<sup>116</sup> the decade after Italy’s defeat in World War II when it was granted the Administrative Trusteeship of Somalia by the United Nations, the so-called “Afis” or “Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia” (1950-1960); and the current postcolonial period at the turn of the Third Millennium in which power dichotomies founded on race and nationality during European colonialism are now deep-seated, naturalized, and continue to significantly impact the experiences of black Italians

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or G2 author, is marginalizing with racial implications. If one considers the single case of Scego who has lived and been educated exclusively in Italy, having earned the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree in Letterature Straniere [“Foreign Literature”] from the Sapienza, one of the most prestigious universities in Italy, and a doctoral degree in pedagogy from the University of Roma Tre, and who is widely published in Italy, the term “migrant/G2 author” is nonsensical and clearly racial. In a recent article that she wrote for the *Internazionale*, Scego notes that a full decade has passed since she, Laila Wadia, Gabriella Kuruvilla, and Ingy Mubiayi published their short stories in the collection, *Pecore nere* [“*Black Sheep*”] (2005) which recounts the experiences of women born to refugee parents in Italy. Scego highlights that journalists and literary critics “non sapevano bene come trattarci” [“didn’t know very well how to deal with us”], the four “straniere che parlavano così bene l’italiano e sapevano tante cose sull’Italia.” [“foreigners who spoke Italian so well and knew so many things about Italy.”] They were “troppo marroni” [“too brown”] to be truly Italian authors, so they invented the “la formuletta magica ‘seconda generazione’” [“the little magic formula of ‘second generation’”] to attempt to categorize them. In her essay, Scego asks rhetorically, “immigrati da dove?” [“immigrants from where?”], commenting ironically that the most significant migration of her life was from North Rome to East Rome. Scego laments that blackness and a history of immigration in the family is like a “l’ergastolo, paghi per tutta la vita” [“a life sentence, you pay for the rest of your life”]. In the same article, she draws a parallel between the exclusion of Italian authors of color from the literary canon to the refusal of the Italian parliament to grant citizenship based on birth in Italy, the *ius soli* law [“right of the soil”], which has yet to be ratified and is opposed vehemently by the political right. (Scego “Siamo ancora”) For an essay on the troubling of the moniker “G2” to refer to writers such as Igiaba Scego, see Jacqueline Andall’s “The G2 Network and Other Second-Generation Voices: Claiming Rights and Transforming Identities” in *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (2010).

<sup>116</sup> Even though the official date of the establishment of Italy’s first colony in Somalia, “Somalia italiana settentrionale” [“Northern Italian Somalia”] is 1905, historian Nicola Labanca in *Oltremare: Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (2002) clarifies that Italy had established commercial territories there from 1889. (Labanca *Oltremare* 8) For a more detailed explanation of Italy’s commercial colonialism of Somalia which preceded the political, official one, see the section in the previous chapter on the history of Italy’s colonies in Somalia.

even to the point of death.<sup>117</sup> Although the text under examination is fictional, *Oltre Babilonia* documents like a series of medical or psychiatric case histories the physical and psychological traumas suffered by Somalians under Italy's colonial domination, which continues in the contemporary racial violence and more insidious forms of racism experienced daily by individuals inscribed as "black" in Europe, even those who have born, raised, and educated there such as Zuhra, the central protagonist of Scego's novel. Thus, in addition to the novel's widely recognized literary value, this selected work by Igiaba Scego can be considered as a Counter History<sup>118</sup> as well which furnishes an alternate accounting of Italy's militarized dominion in the Horn of Africa that has resulted in enduring disastrous consequences in its former colonies. In the case of Somalia, the

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<sup>117</sup> Episodes of racially-motivated violence in Italy would be too numerous to list here. It is sufficient to cite a recent egregious occurrence, the February 2018 shooting of six black migrant farm workers in Macerata by Luca Traini, a 28-year old, self-described Nazi and Fascist. Traini's "justification" for his two-hour long mission to kill as many black immigrants as possible was to vindicate the murder of Paola Mastropietro by a Nigerian drug-dealer. [www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/02/06/news/macerata\\_centri\\_sociali\\_casa\\_pound annullata-188192927/](http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/02/06/news/macerata_centri_sociali_casa_pound annullata-188192927/) In 2017, the same Traini had run for city council in Macerata as the candidate for the Lega, an openly racist and extreme right political party which has gained favor in the last several years in Italy. In the most recent elections in Italy on March 4, 2018, the Lega won a large number of parliament seats, obtaining 58 out of 137 seats in the Senate and 124 out of 316 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, reflecting the increase in the proportion of Italians who support their exclusionary, race- and nationality-based politics. Racial violence in Italy is not targeted only against the male gender, even visibly pregnant women have been assaulted. For example, a group of young Italians assailed a heavily pregnant woman on a train from Milan to Brescia in 2016 which caused her to immediately give birth afterwards. Thankfully, both the woman and her child survived the incident. More recently, the French police boarded a train on the Italian border on March 27, 2018 and physically hauled a pregnant African woman off the train. Passengers recorded the incident on their cell phones and commented that only the black travelers were targeted for passport control and physical and verbal harassment. [www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2018/04/05/migranti-polizia-francese-trascina-fuori-da-un-treno-una-donna-incinta-proveniente-da-ventimiglia/4273435/](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2018/04/05/migranti-polizia-francese-trascina-fuori-da-un-treno-una-donna-incinta-proveniente-da-ventimiglia/4273435/)

<sup>118</sup>It is clear that one of Igiaba Scego's dear projects is the retelling of Italy's colonial past in Somalia. The author includes a succinct history based on her own research at the end of her coming-of-age novel, *La mia casa è dove sono* [*"My home is where I am"*] (2010). Scego's twelve-page historical appendix to *La mia casa è dove sono* is entitled "Profilo storico della Somalia: Dal colonialismo ai giorni nostri" [*"Historical Profile of Somalia: From Colonialism to Today"*] and seems to have a pedagogical purpose given that she includes discussion questions which follow. Her brief historical study summarizes the origins of the current disastrous political, economic, and civil consequences in Somalia which are, in part, traceable to its period as a colony as well as interference from neocolonial powers such as the United States. For a critical essay on Scego's *La mia casa è dove sono*, see Norma Bouchard's "The Mediterranean of Migrant, Postcolonial, and Exile Writers" (2013), pp. 215-218. In addition, Scego's later work, *Roma negata: Percorsi postcolonial nella città* (2014), is a collection of essays coupled with photographs of several members of the Somalian, Eritrean, and Ethiopian diasporas in Rome positioned in front of still standing monuments to Italy's colonial past and fascism. Reference to *Roma negata* is made later in this chapter.

impact of British, French, and Italian colonialism in Somalia as well as Italy's "administration" of the country after World War II have produced aftereffects in the form of social, political, and economic quagmire and more than a half-century of anarchy and civil war.<sup>119</sup> In Igiaba Scego's words, Somalia constitutes "una delle aree più martoriate del continente africano." ["one of the most tormented/war-torn areas on the African continent."] (Scego *Casa* 177)

To summarize briefly the structure and plot of Scego's *Oltre Babilonia*, the novel is polyphonic, being recounted by five alternating voices, two mothers, their respective daughters who are in their mid to late twenties, and the man who is the father of both young women: Maryam, a Somalian refugee living in Rome, is the mother of Zuhra, a university graduate in Brazilian literature and a temporary worker in a large bookstore in Rome. The other mother-daughter pair consists of Miranda, an Argentinian poet who escaped from Mario Kempes' dictatorship in the 1970s and now lives in Rome, and her daughter, Mar, a doctoral student who is writing a thesis on Peter Sellers. Elias, the father of both girls, abandoned his wife, Maryam, and infant daughter Zuhra soon after their arrival in Italy from Somalia and seems to have no fixed residence, wandering among Somalia, Kenya, and Italy; his second daughter, Mar, is the result of a brief relationship with Miranda. Similar to the narrative structure of Ali Farah's *Madre piccola*, the five protagonists alternate relating their stories which intersect with one another. However, unlike Ali Farah's text, only some of the protagonists' discourses are dialogic and they are inter-generational, that is, between different generations, as opposed to intra-generational as in *Madre piccola*. The significance of this will be explained later in this study. In *Oltre Babilonia*, the mothers and the father direct their narration to their daughters which takes the form of voice recordings in the case of Maryam, while Miranda and Elias compose letters, yet the two young women speak/write to

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<sup>119</sup> For a detailed overview of the protracted consequences of British, French, and Italian colonialism in Somalia, see the section dedicated to History in the prior chapter.

themselves in a sort of therapeutic self-narration. In addition, each chapter is labeled with a descriptive byname for the narrator: Maryam's chapters are labeled "Pessottimista" ["Pessimist-Optimist"] which refers to her affective transformation during the narration, from a depressed alcoholic to a woman who begins to confront her addiction and her alienation as a member of the Black Somalian diaspora in Rome and to imagine a different life for herself and her daughter. Miranda is referred to as "La Reaparecida" ["The Reappeared"], a transmutation of "desaparecida" ["disappeared" "missing"] which indicates the thousands of individuals, including Miranda's brother, who were tortured and assassinated in Argentina under the regime of Kempes. Zuhra is called "Negropolitana," an obvious reference to her race but in combination with "metropolitana" ["subway" or "city"] which denotes by metonymy the city, Rome, where she has spent nearly all of her life, yet where she is viewed as an alien. Mar's chapters are headlined by "La Nus-Nus," Somali for "half-half" which connotes her *meticcia* ["mixed race"] racial status given that her mother is white Argentinian and her father is black Somalian, a greatly suffered identity for her. The unique male voice, Elias, is referred to simply as "Il Padre" ["The Father"]; he lacks an affectionate or even descriptive moniker since he is absent in his daughters' lives and, therefore, anonymous to them. It is important to note that Zuhra's discourses create a frame for the novel: she is the only protagonist who speaks in the first person and her chapters open and close the narration. As such, her narrative is privileged by the author, thus, an analysis of her experience as a Black Somalian woman living in Rome will be the principal focus of this study.

As previously referenced, *Oltre Babilonia* records the multi-generational, psycho-affective aftermath of Italian colonialism which is referred to in this analysis as "postcolonial pathology": the protagonists' sadness, despair, and various manifestations of "mental illness" attest to the nexus between the private/personal/affective spheres and the public/political/historical realms. In her



multidisciplinary and mixed genre text,<sup>120</sup> *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Ann Cvetkovich adopts the term “political depression” to describe how “history shapes even the most personal experience of the present.” (Cvetkovich 115, 130) In the first part of her work, Cvetkovich journals her own personal experience with culturally and politically induced depression as a proposed case history; subsequently, in the second section, she considers the diachronic scholarship regarding melancholy harking back to the Medieval period, particularly those frameworks which diverge from the current widely-held medical model of depression as a biochemical imbalance in the brain. Cvetkovich posits a genealogy of “feeling bad,” as she prefers to call it to further distance her theorization of depression from the medical/psychiatric diagnosis, tying the condition instead to social, cultural, and political etiologies. Cvetkovich argues that feelings of political malaise attributable to one’s daily lived experience frequently follow race, the “color line” as she refers to it, which is particularly relevant to the analysis of Scego’s protagonists in *Oltre Babilonia*. In short, Cvetkovich proposes “depression” as the logical, affective consequence of “histories of colonialism, genocide...legal exclusion and everyday segregation and isolation” and experiences of “migration, diaspora, dislocation and dispossession;” instead of a “mental illness” which resides within the individual, she claims that “feeling bad” derives from the “all too vivid afterlife...of colonialism” which continues to impact the lives of individuals who are otherized by their race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and/or economic circumstances. (Cvetkovich 116, 130, 136) This analysis will demonstrate how Italian postcolonial author, Igiaba Scego, “excavates a wound” in the words of Cvetkovich, exposing and interrogating via her narratives the physical and psychological traumas inflicted by the Italians in Somalia which endure in the contemporary racially and nationalistically rooted marginalization of persons “of color” in the European context.

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<sup>120</sup> For an explanation of the mixed genres and multiple disciplines included in Ann Cvetkovich’s work, see footnote #71 in the chapter on Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola*.

In these selected works, Scego returns to the anguish of colonial history in order to understand its legacy: psycho-affective dysphoria which continues to burden multiple generations of the African diaspora in modern-day Italy.

In keeping with the selection of literary texts which can be considered as inverted *Bildungsroman* of the racial, (perceived as) outside-the-nation, female Other, *Oltre Babilonia* presents a thirty-year old Italian female protagonist of Somalian parents with problematic identity formation, particularly in the sphere of love, one of the two principal tasks in the establishment of one's unique sense of self according to Freud and Erikson.<sup>121</sup> Zuhra categorically avoids romantic and/or sexual relationships with the opposite sex even though she is highly desirous of such a rapport:

Sono già nove anni che ho finito la scuola e non si può essere vergini alla mia età, non si usa più...Un po' mi vergogno di questa cosa, è che le vergini sono un po' scolorite, parecchio nervose...sono l'unica ancora (tra le amiche) con l'imene del cuore intatto...solo io sono ancora in questo stato assurdo. (Scego *Oltre* 9, my insertion)

[It's already been nine years since I finished high school and you can't be a virgin at my age, it's not customary anymore...I'm a little ashamed of this, it's that virgins are a little faded, really irritable...I'm the only one (among my friends) with the hymen of my heart still intact...It's only me in this absurd state.]

Zuhra's paralyzing fear of men stems from her history of being raped as a child for years by the white janitor in a Catholic boarding school in Rome. This study will explain Zuhra's unresolved identity as a sexually mature woman who can establish intimate rapports with men, her desired choice of sexual partner, by her social and political experiences as a black female Other in Italy.

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<sup>121</sup> As outlined in the previous chapter, Erik Erikson quotes Freud in his seminal work on identity formation, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). When queried as to what constitutes a "normal," healthy person who has successfully navigated the process of identity formation, Freud responded: "*Lieben und arbeiten*" ["(S/he loves and works)"]. Erikson explained that a healthy adult is "productive" in his/her chosen career which, nonetheless, does not impede him/her from the "full right or capacity to be a sexual or loving human being". Thus, both occupational and intimacy roles are equally important in the constitution of a healthy ego according to Freud and Erikson. (Erikson 136)

Zuhra's postcolonial pathology manifests in other various symptoms of "feeling bad" as well which include depression, panic attacks, and bulimia, all of which have origins in the violence she suffered as a little girl. Moreover, the haunting ghosts of Italy's colonial history which have traumatized several generations of her family, specifically, her parents and grandparents, are salient factors in the genesis of Zuhra's own postcolonial pathology as will be demonstrated. The resolution of the protagonist's identity crisis is affirmed when she becomes a sexually mature woman at age thirty, psychologically free to become close both physically and emotionally with a "fratello dell'epidermide" ["an epidermal brother"] with whom she can go "oltre Babilonia...in un posto dove la mia vagina è felice e innamorata" ["beyond Babylon...in a place where my vagina is happy and in love"]. (Scego *Oltre* 227, 449) This study will demonstrate that Zuhra's recovery from the trauma of rape, which has impeded her identity development as a lover/partner and (dis)colored her life by depression for decades, is owed in great part to the renewed dialogue and intimacy with her mother. Recalling the Black mother archetype proposed by Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004), Zuhra's Black Somalian mother provides a fundamental reference point for Zuhra's affirming identity construction as a Black Muslim woman with Somalian origins in white Italian Catholic Italy. With their shared biology, History, family history, and marginalized positionality, Zuhra's mother represents a decisive referent for her daughter's subjectivity formation as a Black female diasporic subject in the European context. (Wright 178) Moreover, via the medium of storytelling, consonant with the Somalian oral tradition, Zuhra and her mother strengthen their rapport and recuperate lost painful family history, albeit necessary, to deepen intimacy and understanding between the two. The *exemplum* furnished by Zuhra's mother as well as the protagonist's own creation of an explanatory narrative for her childhood rape experience establish the foundation via which Zuhra becomes a

strong Black woman at age thirty, notwithstanding her “epidermalization” by the social-historical-political context in her native Rome.

## II. AMNESIA OF ITALY’S COLONIAL HISTORY AND ITS RELATION TO POSTCOLONIAL PATHOLOGY:

The referents to Italy’s colonial past in the Horn of Africa are numerous and continuously interwoven into the narration of *Oltre Babilonia*, underlining History’s importance to the narrative: the plurivocal narration encompasses three historical moments, but personalizes History demonstrating how it irrevocably marred the lives of Zuhra’s grandparents, parents, and consequently her own. Specifically, Zuhra’s parents, Maryam and Elias, relate the oppression and abuses suffered by their own parents under the Italians during the colonial period (1905-1947), Zuhra’s grandparents, followed by their own harrowing youth endured under Afis, the Italian Trusteeship Administration of Somalia from 1950-1960 and Siad Barre’s military regime (1969-1991), which resulted in their seeking political asylum in Italy as young newlyweds.<sup>122</sup> Lastly, the narrative encompasses the present-day of the text (early 2000s) with Zuhra’s story whose own experience bears the stigmas of the suffering of the prior two generations. As a form of Counter History, *Oltre Babilonia* furnishes names, dates, places, and specific atrocities committed by the Italian colonizers in Somalia, many of which signify veritable crimes of war according to the Geneva Convention for which the Italian government was never held accountable. Scego’s exposure of the barbarities perpetrated by the Italians in Somalia are important in decolonizing a

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<sup>122</sup> For a critical essay on *Oltre Babilonia* and its political commentary, especially in regard to the Afis period, see Susanne Kleinert, “Memoria postcoloniale e spazio ibrido del soggetto in *Oltre Babilonia* di Igiaba Scego” (2011/2012), pp. 205-214.

period of Italy's history which was censured by the State for more than twenty years after the end of World War II and subsequently revised as more humane than that of other European colonizers in Africa and Asia with the prevalent myth of "gli italiani, brava gente" ["the Italians, good people/colonizers"]. Historian Antonio Morone in his *L'Ultima colonia: Come l'Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960* (2011) [*The Last Colony: How Italy Returned to Africa 1950-1960*] condemns the triple amnesia of Italy's colonial past in Somalia, which was forgotten or rewritten by the state, historians, and, consequently, the public in what he calls "il triplice silenzio post-coloniale" ["the triple postcolonial silence"]. (Morone xi) Morone attributes the amnesia and thus silence, first, to the state's closing of the colonial archives immediately after World War II, as well as the notable lack of scientific rigor in the relatively few historical studies on Italian colonialism that were conducted up until the late 1970s. He characterizes the first three to four decades of publications on Italian colonial history as propaganda-like nature in nature, having either an "intento agiografico" ["hagiographic intent"], which elegized a "sogno di gloria perduta" ["dream of lost glory"], or "aprioristicamente apologetica" ["defensive *a priori*"], the most notable characteristic of the government-sponsored studies.<sup>123 124</sup> (Morone xi-xii) Moreover, up until the latter part of the 1970s, historical studies on colonialism were considered, at best, less prestigious by the Italian academy who was even "hostile" to a critical analysis of the argument, especially those that were considered "African" studies. (Morone xii) Furthermore, Morone identifies an additional political element that resulted in widespread amnesia and/or historical revisionism regarding Italy's colonial adventure, the anomalous method in which Somalia was decolonized

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<sup>123</sup> Morone comments that one of the very first to conduct a serious analytical critique of Italian colonialism was Roberto Battaglia with his *La prima guerra d'Africa*, Turin, Einaudi, 1958.

<sup>124</sup> As a case in point of the defensive position of state-endorsed historical studies of Italy's colonial past, Morone references the forty-volume *L'Italia in Africa* which was released from 1955 to 1981 and was sponsored by office of Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs. See *L'Italia in Africa*, Rome, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1955-1981.

which represents an “eccezione” [“exception”] in its path to independence in comparison to all other former African colonies. (Morone xix) Specifically, the United Nations, represented by the big four remaining powers after World War II, the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, reinstated Italy to power in Somalia in 1950 as a concession for Italy’s humiliating losses in the war. Paradoxically, the former colonizer, Italy, was tasked with leading its former colony to independence via Afis, the Amministrazione fiduciaria italiana della Somalia [“Italian Trusteeship Administration of Somalia”], which lasted for a decade until 1960. According to Morone, manipulating the historical account of its colonial past in Somalia was a necessary first step of granting legitimacy to Italy’s period of “colonialismo democratico” [“democratic colonialism”], an oxymoron both semantically as well as politically since it was a failed experiment that led to disastrous consequences in the Horn of Africa. Morone asserts:

(Nel 1950 con la nascita di Afis)...si avviò una sorta di “rimozione del colonialismo” e una conseguente auto-assoluzione “quasi totale” del passato coloniale.<sup>125</sup> Il primissimo passo nella manipolazione della realtà storica fu l’impunità dei crimini coloniali attraverso “un’amnistia, mai promulgata,”<sup>126</sup> che cancellò d’un tratto tutte le colpe italiane, proiettando direttamente i suoi effetti sulla storia e sulla memoria del colonialismo. (Morone ix-x, my insertion)

[“(In 1950 with the birth of Afis)...there began a sort of “removal of colonialism” and a consequent “almost complete” self-absolution of the colonial past. The very first step in the manipulation of historical reality was the impunity of colonial crimes via “a never openly declared amnesty,” which erased in one fell swoop all of the Italian crimes, that then directly casted its effects on the history and the memory of colonialism.”]

The erasure of Italy’s colonial past via the “self-absolution” of colonial war crimes committed during that period fostered the more than half-century of amnesia and consequential lack of critical analysis of a significant epoch which continues to have repercussions both in Somalia and in Italy, the latter of which is a focus of this study regarding the current political and social (non)status of

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<sup>125</sup> Here, Morone quotes Angelo Del Boca’s *L’Africa nella coscienza degli italiani*, Milan, Mondadori, 2002, p. 113.

<sup>126</sup> Morone cites Angelo Del Boca’s *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, Volume II, Rome-Bari, Laterza Editors, 1982, p. 17.

the Black diaspora in the Bel Paese. Fabrizio De Donno and Neelam Srivastava confirm that, even today, Italian postcolonial studies are in their nascence: “Colonialism is still a significantly understudied area in the Italian academy...Italy’s noted reluctance to confront its colonial legacy has meant that scholars who wish to do so most often had to rely on theoretical and historical paradigms elaborated in other colonial contexts (such as British and French).” (De Donno and Srivastava 371-372, my insertion) They relate the amnesia of its colonial past to the contemporary period in which “hierarchies are still defined by civilizational and racial notions established during the colonial period.” (De Donno and Srivastava 378) Therefore, they underscore the necessity to re-examine Italy’s colonial history and confront it critically with today’s postcolonial reality; they cite as one example the widespread resistance to immigration of *extracomunitari*, a social-political status that they trouble as a “uniquely Italian term used to indicate all foreigners of ‘Third World’ origins” who are not European Union citizens, a denomination which is never used to describe “white” foreigners. (De Donno and Srivastava 378) De Donno and Srivastava call for historical, cultural, and literary studies of Italian colonialism and postcolonialism as a fundamental step in re-imagining Italy as a “multi-ethnic and multicultural democracy.” (De Donno and Srivastava 378)

Through narrative, Scego’s novel *Oltre Babilonia* aims pointedly to make public a non-whitewashed version of History, an important passage in an analytical examination of Italian colonialism. Scego’s correction and re-rendering of Italy’s colonial and “trusteeship” administration in Somalia can serve as a Counter History, an alternative telling of official history, in other words, a “counter public” which “bring(s) visibility to a social problem inaudible in previously existing frames”.<sup>127</sup> (Irving 87) Related to the relative infancy stage of Italian historical

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<sup>127</sup> Irving’s piece, “Borders of the Body: Black Women, Sexual Assault, and Citizenship” (2007), was composed in another context, that of the police’s and justice system’s refusal to recognize and dismissal of rape charges by black

and postcolonial studies, this significant episode of history is still not generally taught, at least accurately, in Italian schools which perpetuates to yet another generation the myth of *gli italiani*, *brava gente*. Literary scholar Lidia Curti confirms:

The Italian colonial “adventure” is removed from national consciousness and from our unconscious; it’s not studied at school and, until recent times, it was rarely the object of research and review: the removal is connected to the violence perpetrated but also the defeat...These female epics...contain a history that in general remains outside Italian literature, (and constitutes) a historical re-writing that includes a forgotten part of Italian history, from a real and true colonialism to a continuation of the same power in the postcolonial epic. (Curti *Scritture* 34, 39, my insertion and translation)

As sustained by Curti, Italian postcolonial literature (such as the works by Carla Macoggi, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego examined in this project), are instrumental in recalling and rewriting colonial history, especially for the formation of the next generation and in the establishment of a “multi-ethnic and multicultural democracy,” in the words of De Donno and Srivastava, which confers rights and respect for all individuals regardless of race, gender, or ethnic origin. Another important consideration is that postcolonial theory as a discipline is a fairly recent newcomer to the Italian academy and has relied on the much more extensive scholarship in the field from the British, French, and American contexts that has been translated into Italian only in the last fifteen years. (Andall and Duncan 8) Yet, the peculiarities of the Italian historical and political context render the postcolonial epistemologies conducted by scholars in other countries

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women. Irving argues that black, female bodies do not enjoy, as full citizens would, equal protection under the law in the United States. Poor, black women are frequently portrayed by the American legal system as “lying bitches” or “deserving whores,” therefore, the rape of them is normalized. Sexual violation of their bodies is not acknowledged as “real” rape since these women are hypersexualized, considered perpetually accessible for sex. Irving conceives of rape narratives, written by the victims as “counter publics,” even fictionalized ones citing as exemplary Gayl Jones’ *Eva’s Man* (1976). A “counter public” retells rape from the often black, poor woman’s viewpoint and provides a way to “create space,” give voice, and “bring visibility” to experiences of sexual violence on the black, female Other which will be significant in the analysis of Zuhra’s being raped in *Oltre Babilonia*. Irving argues that rape counter publics differ greatly from the public, “official” narratives which derive from the state’s criminal justice system. Irving’s notion of creating a counter public to contradict hegemonic narratives can be useful in considering Scego’s fictional works as alternative accountings of the official history of Italian colonialism in Africa, told by the colonized themselves and their descendants.



not directly applicable to Italy's situation. Furthermore, the analyses that have been conducted in the fields of history, law, literature, and postcolonial theory studies are not readily available to the public, which renders literature a particularly efficacious means to correct the collective amnesia of Italy's colonialism with its continuing heritage in the contemporary social-political marginalization of persons of color. In the words of Miranda, one of the protagonists of *Oltre Babilonia*, via art: "trasformo il pianto in una lingua, una rebellione. ["I transform weeping into language, into a rebellion.]" (Scego *Babilonia* 415)

Another important consideration is the positionality of the scholars conducting colonial and postcolonial studies research and producing Italian postcolonial literature. Walter D. Mignolo supports a project like Igiaba Scego's to re-write history from the black Somalian-Italian standpoint. Mignolo calls for the "intellectual decolonization...of (Western) scholarship" which, among other operations, means negating the universality of European/American produced knowledge with its "assumption of...universal scope, valid for all times and all societies." (Mignolo 64, 70) Mignolo argues for decolonization of epistemologies via what he calls "border thinking," that is, a "deconstructive operation" that re-imagines and reconstructs knowledge from the subaltern perspective. (Mignolo 71) This operation must necessarily include "radical criticism from the perspective of the indigenous." (Mignolo 74) Therefore, Scego's project to re-write history from the standpoint of a black, female Italian writer with familial, linguistic, and cultural origins in a former Italian colony is consistent with Mignolo's manifest of the "urgent necess(ity) to think and produce knowledge from the colonial difference" which acknowledges the "geopolitics of knowledge," as he puts it. (Mignolo 85) Analogous to Mignolo's argument which highlights the power involved in the creation of knowledge, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe argues the subjectivity of history: "History is not a neutral concept...History is a legend, an invention of the

present. It is both a memory and a reflection of our present.” (Mudimbe 190, 195) Mudimbe denies the Western/European hegemony over historical knowledge production: “nobody is at the center of human experience, and there is no human who could be defined as the center of creation.” (Mudimbe 194) Thereby, he refutes “epistemological ethnocentrism,” the “belief that there is nothing to be learned from ‘them’ (non-Europeans/non-Western/non-whites) unless it is already ‘ours’ (European/Western/white) or comes from ‘us’.” (Mudimbe 15) Mudimbe calls, instead, for “African gnosis,” knowledge produced with passion by a “subject-object who refused to vanish...(who) has gone from the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of an absolute discourse.” (Mudimbe 200)

In the spirit of Mignolo and Mudimbe, Scego refutes the white/European/hegemonic version of Italian colonial and postcolonial history and positions herself as a valid subject and voice to declare an alternate accounting which rectifies the lies and corrects the prevalent public amnesia. In *Oltre Babilonia* as well as in her other fictional and non-fictional works,<sup>128</sup> Scego categorically negates the false myth of *gli italiani brava gente* during Italy’s colonialism in Africa. Moreover, she identifies the persistent colonial hierarchies in Italy of race, nation, and gender which manifest yet today as racism, racially- and gender-based violence, social marginalization rooted in race and nationality, and differential immigration and citizenship rights which are codified on color and

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<sup>128</sup> Scego’s literary works which address the re-writing of Italy’s colonial history in Somalia and the continuing postcolonial repercussions of such are numerous. Adopting principally the genre of narrative, they include: her collection of essays *Roma negata: Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (2014); her autobiographical coming-of-age novel *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010); her novels *Adua* (2015), *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), and *Rhoda* (2004); as well as numerous short stories and journalistic articles, several of which are referred to in this study. In addition, her *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* (2003) is a bilingual Italian-Somalian biography on her mother’s childhood in Somalia written for children which includes information on Somalian geography, language, history, religion, food, music, and film, as well as its historical links with Italy. *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* (2003) clearly has pedagogical objectives given that is directed at children and aims to humanize the black immigrant to Italy by elucidating his/her extensive culture and history in an engaging way.

national provenance. Via her literary production, Scego calls for the decolonization of Italy's colonial past. For example, in her 2014 collection of essays entitled *Roma negata: Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* ["*Rome negated: Postcolonial Pathways in the City*"], Scego interrogates the presence of fascist monuments in Rome, troubling the discourse and ideology that these honorary icons of Italy's colonial past continue to propagate:

In our country, we preferred instead to turn the page without understanding, without internalizing, without going through the memories of the atrocities lived and/or perpetrated. In Italy, memory is divided or forgotten. Never studied, never analyzed, never relived, never thought about again. Most of all, Italy's history was never decolonized...It should have been rethought, reconstructed, digested, recomposed in a way which left space to the history that not only we did not know, but that we did not want to know. A distracted Italy that never wanted to learn from its past errors, and, without a real memory, would be forced by circumstances to repeat them with always more worrisome delirium. (Scego *Roma* 87, my translation)

In the vein of providing a Counter History of Italy's colonial past from the position of a Black Italian woman with Somalian refugee parents, Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* documents specifics dates, events, places, and the war crimes committed by the Italians during colonialism and the Afis decade in Somalia. Many times, Scego's novel recalls Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) which chronicles the violence perpetrated by the French on the Algerians. Analogous to Fanon's testimonies of the atrocities inflicted during French colonialism, Scego attests in her narrative to the Italian state's appropriation of Somalians' homes, property, and livelihood and the Italians' practices of gang rape, torture, forced military service, large-scale massacres, and establishing corrupt governments, thereby, summarily refuting the *italiani, brava gente* myth. The physical and psychological traumas suffered by Somalians under Italian colonialism and during Afis manifest in Scego's protagonists, even two generations later, as: clinical depression, alcoholism, panic attacks, bulimia, impotence, suppressed sexuality, alienation from family members, and suffered construction of an affirmative identity. It is important to acknowledge that

Fanon established the tradition of assigning the burden of psychiatric disorders to colonial violence by virtue of his chapter entitled “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In his forward to the text, Homi Bhabha conceives the doubled role of Frantz Fanon as a “politician-psychiatrist.” Bhabha observes that Fanon “attempts to decipher...a problem, event, identity, or action as it comes to be represented or framed in the...relations between the realms of political and psycho-affective experience.” (Bhabha xxxvii) Bhabha credits Fanon with his novel approach to interpreting the political in its imposing effect on the psychological sphere:

It is Fanon’s great contribution to our understanding of ethical judgment and political experience to insistently frame his reflections on violence, decolonization, national consciousness, and humanism in terms of the psycho-affective realm—the body, dreams, psychic inversions and displacements... (Bhabha xix)

As explanatory in various presentations of politically-induced depression, Fanon, a medical doctor-psychiatrist, presents a series of case histories in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the “pathology that it (colonial violence, war, torture, dehumanization, famine) produces” which includes, among others: impotence, depression, homicidal impulses even in children, physical and psychological abuse of one’s children and spouse, a multitude of psychoses, and what he deems “psychological shock.” (Fanon *Wretched* 184, my insertion) Preceding Cvetkovich’s hypotheses on politically-induced depression by four decades, Fanon attributes these cases of “mental disorders” not to biochemical or physiological etiologies, even though he was a physician. Instead, he asserts that: “the triggering factor is principally the bloody, pitiless atmosphere, the generalization of inhuman practices, of people’s lasting impression that they are witnessing a veritable apocalypse.” (Fanon *Wretched* 183) Fanon ascribes the French colonizers’ justification of their inhumane treatment of the Algerians by their “systemized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other of any attribute of humanity.” (Fanon *Wretched* 182) He argues that the French absolved themselves of the massacre and torture of the Algerians with the

(pseudo)science of the era: European psychiatrists and neurologists claimed that the cerebral cortex of the “natives,” particularly the frontal lobe, the seat of intelligence, was structurally inferior to their own. They equated the African to a “lobotomized European” who functioned more or less at the level of an animal who is governed by the diencephalon, the reptilian brain. (Fanon *Wretched* 225, 227) Scego makes a similar observation in *Oltre Babilonia* to Fanon’s observation that the Europeans conceptualize(d) Africans as beasts, as an inferior species, in “zoological terms” as an object being in a colonially-constructed Manichean dichotomy yet in contemporary Italy. (Fanon *Wretched* 6-7) A brief lexical analysis of the terms with which Scego’s Black protagonists are referred to pejoratively by white Italians confirms the former’s relegation to an inhuman status. Scego’s characters are deemed: “negra saracena” [“Saracen negro”], “animale selvaggio dalla foresta” [“a wild animal from the forest”], “Zulù” [“Zulus”], “Kunta Kinte,” “sporca negra” [“dirty nigger”], “pidocchi” [“fleas (of society)”], “scimmie che mangiano banane” [“monkeys who eat bananas”], “sguattera” [“scullery maid”], “servo” [“servant”], “brutta come la cacca” [“ugly like shit”], “il primo sospetto” [“the first (criminal) suspect”]. (Scego *Babilonia* 13, 14, 124, 235, 237, 260, 264, 265, 282, 393, 399) The common elements that bind the lexicon are their connotations of inhumanity, inferiority, and their universalizing nature. As Zuhra wryly observes: “(I bianchi/italiani) Non distinguevano un nero dall’altro.” [“(The whites/Italians) can’t tell one black apart from another,” underlining the essentialist ideal of black individuals in Italy. (Scego *Babilonia* 285, my insertion) Moreover, gender intersects with race and nationality in *Oltre Babilonia*, summoning the Black Venus myth which was promulgated during colonialism. Black women are conceptualized as: “goccioline di cioccolato” [“drops of chocolate”] to be devoured, “orifizio” [“orifice”], “troie” [“sluts/prostitutes”], “puttana” [“whore”], “un animale esotico” [“exotic animal”] like a lioness or panther to be tamed by raping, or “vampiri” [“vampires”] to be

feared and thus annihilated. (Scego *Babilonia* 26, 39, 227, 263, 393) In a particularly poignant passage, Mar, the young Somalian-Argentinian woman who was born and has grown up in Rome, is incomprehensible to Italians given her indeterminate race and they regard her as they would an exotic animal in a zoo:

“Posso toccarli (i capelli)?” Era una domanda frequente. Le mani violavano il suo cranio, inopportune. Mani di bidella, mani di maestra, mani di compagni, mani di parenti...La toccavano come se fosse una specie in via di estinzione, un animale selvaggio della foresta. Era un’umana da zoo. Un esemplare, non una persona...(Se fosse l’Ottocento) L’avrebbero messa in una bella gabbia...sicuramente le avrebbero scoperto i seni perché dopotutto lei era solo un animale, una cosa...Se fosse stata una donna della colonia...i bianchi l’avrebbero usata come un orifizio per dimenticare la noia e la nostalgia...Però per fortuna Mar era di un’altra epoca. Nella sua però gli zoo erano più subdoli. Stavano tutti nella testa...la gente ora ti diceva “La tua cultura è troppo diversa dalla mia. Siamo incompatibili.” (Scego *Oltre* 392-394, my insertions)

[“Can I touch them (your hair)?” It was a frequent question. Their hands violated her cranium, inappropriately. The hands of the custodian at school, the hands of the teacher, the hands of her classmates, the hands of her relatives...They touched her like she was a species on the way to extinction, a savage forest animal. She was a human being for the zoo. A specimen, not a person...(If it were the 1800s) They would have put her in a nice cage...they would have surely exposed her breasts because, after all, she was only an animal, a thing...If she had been a woman of the colony...the whites would have used her like an orifice to forget their boredom and nostalgia...However, fortunately Mar was from a different epoch. In hers, however, the zoos were more underhanded. They were all in our heads...People didn’t tell you anymore that you were of an inferior race...now people tell you: “Your culture is too different from mine. We’re not compatible.”]

In a corresponding manner to Fanon’s bivalent role of “politician-psychiatrist” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in her telling of *Oltre Babilonia* Igiaba Scego dons the triple hat of “politician/cultural critic/author” to correct the collective amnesia of Italy’s colonial past: she adopts literature as both an artistic medium but also as a political tool to correct Italy’s false or erased colonial history, to heighten awareness of colonialist ideologies and hierarchical positionalities which persist today, and to demonstrate their significant impact on the lived reality of the racial and outside-the-nation Other in modern-day Italy. Regarding the central thesis of this work, to demonstrate the nexus between Italy’s colonial/postcolonial history and culturally-

induced malaise in the abject Other, *Oltre Babilonia* makes manifest multiple generations of psychopathology in the central protagonist's, Zuhra's, family. Verifiable psychiatric "diagnoses" range from major depression to eating disorders to alcoholism to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to Rape Trauma Syndrome. All are traceable, at least in part, to a single heinous event recounted in the novel: the public gang rape of a sixteen-year old Somalian boy, Majid, Zuhra's grandfather and Elias' father, by a band of Italian and German soldiers during Italy's Trustee Administration of Somalia (1950-1960). This calamity would continue to haunt Zuhra's family two generations later. Majid, carrying the burden of the psychological and physical trauma of being humiliatingly and violently raped by several soldiers in succession, would lead to multi-generational scars on his entire family line. The horrific incident occurs during a festive voyage to a cousin's wedding in Mogadishu. Majid's future wife, a fifteen-year old girl, was also repeatedly raped in his presence in the full view of passersby and the other travelers in their carriage. Another traveling companion was shot in the face in front of his wife, a third man was sodomized, his testicles brutally dissected from his body while he was still alive, then he was left to bleed to death on the road. Clearly, the degrading violence traumatizes Majid and results in his perennial conviction that he had lost his dignity as a man, while still an adolescent, a conviction that he is never able to shake: "Non era stato uomo, non aveva difeso la sua donna, il suo orgoglio. Era solo un culo di negro violato. Una roba inutile. Sterile." ["He wasn't a man, he hadn't defended his woman, his pride. He was only a raped nigger ass. A useless thing. Sterile."] (Scego *Oltre* 312-313) As a result of the violent attack on his body and his psyche, Majid suffers from debilitating depression for the rest of his life:

Prima di quella corriera maledetta era stato un chiacchierone, divertente, irriverente quasi. Invece dopo, niente era stato più lo stesso. Non c'era più niente per cui valesse la pena di vivere e quindi ridere. Era diventato serio, spento, un vegetale catatonico. (Scego *Oltre* 159-160)

[Before that damned stagecoach trip, he was garrulous, fun, almost irreverent. Afterwards, instead, he was never the same again. There wasn't anything worth living for and hence laughing about. He had become serious, exhausted, a catatonic vegetable.]

Majid marries his cousin, the young girl who was raped alongside him, primarily out of shame and their being united by the horrific experience. They live a sexless marriage except for a few efforts, at her insistence, to conceive a child together. Tragically, Shamey, his wife, bleeds to death during childbirth and Majid, "immune to joy," initially does not recognize his son as his own: "Come se la faccenda (la morte della moglie e il bambino) non lo riguardasse affatto." ["It was as if (his wife's death in childbirth and the baby) had nothing to do with him."] (Scego *Oltre* 121, my insertion) Nevertheless, Majid marries again immediately, recognizing that his son will die without sustaining breast milk and the nurturing that he is unable to provide. Majid establishes the same pact of chastity with his second wife, Bushra, since he doesn't feel deserving to call himself a man, must less perform like one: "Era già stato difficile drizzare quella sua appendice di mascolinità, ma chiedere pure di godere era davvero troppo...Il matrimonio era stato un contratto, niente di più...Il matrimonio fu una formalità." ["It had been really difficult to get it up, his masculine appendage, but asking him to enjoy it as well was really too much...Their marriage had been a contract, nothing more...Their marriage was a formality."] (Scego *Oltre* 160, 208)

In addition to depression, impotence, and negation of his sexuality, Majid suffers from nightmares, the equivalent of what a psychiatrist would label Post Traumatic Stress Disorder<sup>129</sup> which forces him to perpetually relive his humiliation suffered at the hands of the Italian soldiers:

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<sup>129</sup> The *DSM-5, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), is considered the definitive text for defining psychiatric diagnoses. It describes the "essential feature" of PTSD, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, as the "development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events." Sexual violence results in the highest rates of PTSD. They note that the reaction to the traumatic event is "especially severe or long-lasting when the stressor is interpersonal and intentional," as is the case with Majid's rape on a public road by Italian and German soldiers in the full view of his traveling companions and his future wife. PTSD typically presents, as in the case of Majid, with the re-experiencing of the trauma with "recurrent memories of the event" which are intrusive, involuntary, and distressing. In addition, as is also true for Majid, a common symptom is reliving the event during sleep in which the "event is replayed" and sleep is disturbed by the physiological sensation of experiencing



Dormiva sempre così poco e quel poco era funestato dagli incubi. In tutti i suoi deliri notturni vedeva la faccia di quel fascista che lo aveva spezzato. Sentiva quella sensazione di bollore che gli aveva trapassato l'ano. Sentiva sempre quel caldo orrendo. Quel bagnato. Quella schiuma dentro di sé. Sentiva il battere ritmico del pene del fascista dentro di lui. Poi sentiva la vergogna. Sentiva tutta la sua virilità perdersi nell'oscenità di quel momento. Vedeva poi i suoi sfortunati compagni di viaggio. Soprattutto vedeva il cadavere di quel disgraziato che era stato ucciso. Mentre il fascista lo traforava, Majid pensava: "Come avrei preferito essere lui, il morto." (Scego *Oltre* 159)

[He slept very little and that little bit was always afflicted by nightmares. In all of his nocturnal deliria he saw the face of that fascist who had split him wide open. He felt that boiling sensation that had perforated his anus. He felt that horrible heat. That wetness. The foam inside of him. He felt the rhythmic beating of that fascist's penis inside his body. And then he felt the shame. He felt all of his virility disappeared in the obscenity of that moment. He then saw his more unlucky travel companions. Mostly the cadaver of that poor wretch that they had killed. While that fascist bore through him, Majid thought: "I would prefer to be him, the dead one."]

In a seemingly unconscious effort to overcome his shame, Majid makes steps to definitively annul his injured masculinity by transforming himself by degrees into a woman. First, he finds work as a cook, an atypical employment for a Somalian man; he assumes all domestic duties at home; he "keeps his body far from his wife's in bed" and never consummates his second marriage even though his wife tries in every conceivable manner to seduce him. Lastly, he completes his physical, and one could say psychological, transformation into a woman,<sup>130</sup> rendering his body's appearance consonant with his internal representation of his annihilated masculinity:

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the trauma again. Moreover, victims frequently blame themselves, having "erroneous cognitions" about the event, as is also true for Majid when he feels guilty for not protecting Shamey and for "allowing" the armed soldiers to rape him. The *DSM-5* notes that the "erroneous cognitions" can also be applied to one's identity: in the case of Majid, he perceives himself as emasculated, not a "real man," after being raped and is never able to enjoy typical heterosexual intercourse with his two wives even though he is in love with them and is immensely attracted to them. Another relevant characteristic symptom of PTSD in Majid's case is the "feeling of detachment or estrangement from others." As narrated in *Oltre Babilonia*, on the birth of his newborn son, Elias, Majid feels nothing and claims that the child "has nothing to do with me." He takes responsibility for him only because his wife dies giving birth and the child will die without his intervention, thus explaining his immediate remarriage. Even years later, Majid describes Elias as his second wife's son and he never enjoys physical or psychological intimacy with either of his wives, and he eventually abandons his family. (*DSM-5* 265-290)

<sup>130</sup> For a reflection on Majid's damaged masculinity owed to the denial of his humanity by the Italian colonizers and its consequent association with illness, see Simone Brioni, "The Somali Italian Borderland in *Oltre Babilonia*" (2015), p. 135.

Andò in bagno. Ci restò mezz'ora. Si depilò tutto. Ascelle, gambe, baffi, barba. Si fece liscio come una fanciulla. Si lavò. Si impiasticciò tutto delle essenze della moglie. Poi si mise quel vestito che aveva sognato tutta la notte...Si sentì bello...Bello. Unico...Uscì di casa e non tornò più. (Scego *Oltre* 322-323)

[He went into the bathroom. He stayed there a half hour. He shaved everything. Armpits, legs, moustache, beard. He made himself as smooth as a little girl. The he washed. He smeared his body with all of his wife's perfumes. Then he put on that dress that he had dreamed about all night...He felt beautiful...Beautiful. Unique...He left the house and never came back again.”]

The conclusion of Majid's story, the father of Elias and grandfather of Zuhra, is that he abandons his family, unable to liberate himself from the violence and humiliation to which he had been subjected by the group of Italian and German soldiers, notably more than a decade after the conclusion of World War II during Afis, Italy's so-called Trustee Administration of Somalia. Ostensibly intended to facilitate Somalia's path toward independent governance, instead, the period was a concession by the United Nations to pacify Italy's injured ego and essentially prolonged their role as colonizer. As Majid's son, Elias, comments in the novel with bitter irony, the Italians returned to Somalia: “insegnare la democrazia a quegli zulu.” [“to teach democracy to those Zulus.”] (Scego *Oltre* 260) Historian Antonio Morone in *L'Ultima colonia: Come l'Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960* (2011) argues just this point: that Italy's return to Somalia as “trustee” after the terminus of its official colonialism was in essence a continuation of Italy's colonial domination of the Somalian people, as the cruel rape of teenagers Majid and his future wife and the senseless massacre of their traveling cohorts on their way to a wedding demonstrate. In fact, Morone assigns a great part of the responsibility for the failed progress of Somalia toward national unity and the country's long-term destabilization to Afis and the Italian's (mis)management during that period:

L'Amministrazione fiduciaria italiana della Somalia (Afis) fu l'unica decolonizzazione italiana attraverso la quale la nuova Italia cercò una prova di recupero per un passato mai condannato. L'esperimento di un colonialismo democratico scontò tuttavia la continuità di pratiche e uomini della vecchia amministrazione italiana in aggiunta a un paternalismo insito

nell'idea stessa di tutela. Il collasso dello Stato nel 1991 e la progressiva riorganizzazione dello spazio somalo attraverso le logiche della guerra civile, che sconvolge ancora gran parte della Somalia meridionale, hanno dimostrato le debolezze delle istituzioni nate all'ombra dell'Italia...La decisione dei vertici Afis di perseguire il trapianto del modello politico italiano lungo la doppia rappresentanza, partitica e tradizionale, si rivelò perdente, come pure la scelta di coltivare i rapporti clientelari con il partito dei capi, invece di puntare subito sulla Somali Youth League, che rappresentava la componente più moderna della società...La capacità dell'Italia di elaborare soluzioni politiche e istituzionali durevoli per il futuro Stato somalo fu nel complesso insufficiente..." (Morone 182-183)

[The Italian Administrative Trusteeship of Somalia (Afis) was the only Italian decolonization via which the new Italy (after World War II and the fall of fascism) attempted to salvage a colonial past that was never condemned. The experiment of a 'democratic colonialism' took for granted, however, the continuation of practices and the men/leaders of the old Italian colonial administration, in addition to the inherent paternalism in the same idea of tutelage (Afis). The collapse of the Somalian State in 1991 and the gradual reorganization of the Somalian space via the logic of civil war, which yet disturbs the greater part of Southern Somalia, demonstrated the weaknesses of the institutions born in the shadow of Italy...The decision of the upper echelons of Afis to pursue a transplant of the Italian political model in Somalia during the period of double representation, the political parties and tradition, revealed itself as a losing one, as was the choice to cultivate relationships of cronyism with the leaders of the clans, instead of aiming immediately at supporting the Somali Youth League which represented the most modern component of the society...Overall, the capability of Italy to elaborate long-lasting political and institutional solutions for the future Somalian State was insufficient...]

Ioan Lewis, social anthropologist, studied Somalian culture and history firsthand from the 1950s until his death in 2014. In his *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society* (2008), Lewis' assessment of Italy's Afis period concurs with that of Morone: Lewis holds that Italy's return to Somalia after the war, with the backing of the four superpowers, the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, and its attempted imposition of a Italian political model of government and democracy was "unsuitable" for the Somalian context and, thus, unsuccessful. Lewis critiques the "top-down approach" that the United Nations and other "Eurocentric organisations" employed in their policy of imposing a "Eurocentric model" of government and democracy, which is framed by Morone in his quote above as a "transplant of the Italian political model" with its characteristic cronyism and corruption. (Ioan Lewis x, 34) Lewis observes that

Europe's and America's "many fruitless attempts to re-establish governance in Somalia" did/does not take into consideration the Somalis' nomadic culture and history nor their clan-based, decentralized conceptualization of nation. (Ioan Lewis x, xii) As an alternative, successful model, Lewis cites the formation and stability of Somaliland, the former British protectorate, which was accomplished by Somalis themselves in a transparent, complex negotiation with clan leaders and representatives of various political factions. In Lewis' assessment, Somaliland is an exemplary, established "self-governing outpost of democracy in Africa" which was achieved by a "bottom-up approach," not by European "experiments," as he frames Italy's Afis period in Italy. (Ioan Lewis ix, xi, 34)

The conceptualization of the European as the necessary civilizer of the African is related to the origin of the word "colonial" as noted by Mudimbe. He observes that the term derives from the Latin *colere* which means "to cultivate or to design." (Mudimbe 1) Colonialism then, in the European imaginary, was to have been a mechanism to "transform non-European areas (and peoples) into fundamentally European constructs," as both Morone and Ioan Lewis argue, hence the perceived and justified necessity to "civilize" the colonized. (Mudimbe 1) According to Mudimbe, colonialism entailed a methodical project which involved not only dominating and exploiting the land and resources in the colonies, but also "domesticating (the) natives...reform(ing) their minds," ostensibly to "humanize" and Christianize the savages but, in reality, to turn them into efficient modes of production for the European empires. (Mudimbe 2) Mudimbe confirms the prevailing result of colonialism which does not lead to the purported aim of the "evolution" of the indigenous; rather, Western empires in Africa have proven to be "developmental failures" as supported by empirical studies which document:

...demographic imbalance, extraordinarily high birth rates, progressive disintegration of the classic family structure, illiteracy...social and economic disparities, dictatorial regimes

functioning under the cathartic name of democracy, the breakdown of religious traditions, the constitution of syncretic churches, etc. (Mudimbe 5)

Consistent with Mudimbe's assertions, in *Oltre Babilonia*, Elias comments with irony in his letters to his daughter that the Italian government had not improved living conditions in Somalia during the civilizing period, Afis: "In quei dieci anni le infrastrutture sono state nulle. E la pubblica amministrazione completamente ferma." ["In those ten years, the infrastructures were inexistent. And the public administration completely stalled."] (Scego *Oltre* 260) Nor did Italy earnestly commit to its mandate of assisting Somalia towards independence. To the contrary, as Elias comments: "l'Italia insegnò quindi quello che sapeva fare meglio: la corruzione. Inoltre una forte classe politica somala non serviva al Belpaese. La meta era semmai tirare su una classe politica bisognosa e corruttibile." ["Italy, therefore, taught what it knew best how to do: corruption. Besides, a strong Somali political class wasn't useful for the Belpaese. If anything, the goal was to bring about a servile and corruptible political class."] (Scego *Oltre* 260) Which is precisely what occurred: the Italians positioned the cruel dictator, Siad Barre, into power who had been trained by and served in the Italian Secret Service and had studied in Italy. Elias describes how Barre was hand-picked for his easy corruptibility by the Italian government to be the dictator of the officially "independent" Somalia. Predictably, Barre's reign (1969-1991) rendered conditions intolerable for the Somali people which led to a mass exodus of political refugees from their homeland which continues to this day. In the end, Barre was deposed by the Somalis themselves but, by then, he had left the country in chaos with decades of civil war; Elias observes: "ci (Barre) ha quasi rovinato la vita." ["he (Barre) almost ruined our lives."] (Scego *Oltre* 260, my insertion) Frantz Fanon warns in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the generalized, corrupt pattern of placing a bourgeois pawn of the former colonists into power which guarantees failure of the transition to independence, as occurred in Somalia's case. Under the guise of national unity and democracy, these figures have

neither a clear-cut ideology, nor economic expertise, much less the interests of the proletariat at heart. Instead, Fanon warns that the former system of exploitation is maintained since a “hedonistic mentality prevails” in the demagogues who exploit their position for self-serving means. (Fanon *Wretched* 101) Fanon’s solution to avoid the “useless” bourgeoisie phase, as he dubs it, is violence to remove the colonizing power, which is what occurred in the deposition of Siad Barre. (Fanon *Wretched* 124) Fanon calls, instead, for the “political education of the masses” with a single political party which must be “the direct expression of the proletariat,” the end goal being “a free people living in dignity (which is truly) a sovereign people,” a solution which has not yet been achieved in Somalia. (Fanon *Wretched* 124, 130, 139)

Confirming the historical, cultural, and philosophical arguments of Mudimbe, Fanon, Morone, and Ioan Lewis that Italy’s charge during Afis of leading Somalia to democracy, “teaching democracy to the Zulus” as Elias so aptly puts it, was an inherent contradiction is negated by Scego’s horrific presentation of Elias, an adolescent civilian, being gang raped in the novel. Literary scholar Lidia Curti identifies Majid’s rape by Italian and German military soldiers as the “foundational nucleus of the story,” being the central cause of “the suffering and the lack of communication (between the successive generations).” (Curti 44, my translation) As the stories of Elias, his son, and Zuhra, his granddaughter, will demonstrate, Majid’s humiliation would perpetuate generations of heartache and psychopathology in his familial line. A generation later, Elias, Zuhra’s father, will desert his wife and daughter as did his father before him:

Maryam (sua moglie) abbandonata da Elias. Copione standard. Il figlio che segue le orme del padre. Il figlio che abbandona una donna come il padre. Il figlio con un dolore troppo grande da condividere, come il padre. Addio sposa. Addio talamo. Addio vita mia. (Scego *Oltre* 433, my insertion)

[Maryam (his wife) abandoned by Elias. Typical movie script. The son who follows in the footsteps of his father. The son who abandons his woman, just like his father. The son with

a heartache too big to share, just like his father. Farewell, my bride. Farewell to our marriage vows. Farewell, my love.]

Elias, referred to as the anonymous “il padre” [“the father”], in *Oltre Babilonia* is a character omnipresent for his void, similar to Taageere in Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola*. His neglect of his own family and his palpable absence in raising his daughters can be interpreted as representative of the physical and emotional disconnect common among political refugees/immigrants whose families have been dismantled by war, poverty, trauma, and the social-political-economic repercussions of European colonialism. The deprivation of parents and other family members for migrant children leads to a lack of knowledge of one’s family history, language, culture, and place of origin. Consequently, the sense of alienation within one’s family contributes in a significant way to a fragile sense of identity, especially among the youngest members. In Scego’s narrative, Elias is the missing father of the two, young adult protagonists and his absence is a source of great pain for them: Zuhra is the product of his marriage with Maryam whom he left when their daughter was still an infant, and Mar is the result of a single sexual experience with her mother, a child whom he has never seen and it is not clear from the narrative if he knows of her existence. Both girls refer to him with dismissive terms which highlight his exclusively biological role as a father. The girls call him: “lo spermatozoo...(che) ha sbagliato strada” [“the spermatozoa...(who) took the wrong street”] and “quell’uomo che...ha donato il liquido seminale” [“that man who...donated his seminal fluid”]. (Scego *Oltre* 341, 338, my insertions) For Zuhra, Elias exists as only as a nameless man in an old photograph whom her mother never mentions. For Mar, who has an Argentinian mother, Elias represents the man who rendered her a despised, uninterpretable “species.” Her indeterminate, uninterpretable racial status in Italy where race and nationality are undeniable essentialist categories is an anguishing one for her. As such, she refers to herself pejoratively as: “Mezzosangue. Seminegra. Mi vergogno. Per i black non abbastanza scura. Per i white non

abbastanza chiara...half-nigger? Seminegra? Semibianca? Semipallida? Seminiente?” [“Half blood. Half negro. I’m ashamed. For blacks, I’m not dark enough. For whites, I’m not light enough...half nigger? Half negro? Half white? Half pale-face? Half nothing?”] (Scego *Oltre* 389)

It is not until his daughters are grown, nearly three decades after he fathered them, that Elias becomes cognizant of his negligence and acknowledges his failure as a father: “Sono stato concepito. E ho concepito. Sono figlio e padre. Ma sono anche un figlio mancato, un padre mancato.” [“I was conceived. And I conceived. I am a son and a father. But I am also a failure as a son, a failure as a father.”] (Scego *Oltre* 60) Like his daughters, he recognizes his role as a father is merely biological. Since it is impossible to recuperate decades of lost years with his daughter(s) who are now in their late twenties and early thirties, Elias writes letters to Zuhra to explain his remiss, not of his own volition but at the urging of his former wife Maryam: “Devi raccontare la tua storia, per non perderla, per non perderti.” [“You have to tell your story, to not lose her, to not lose yourself.”] (Scego *Oltre* 60) Through his one-way correspondence, Elias transmits crucial family stories of which Zuhra is unaware and, yet, which have significantly impacted his (lack of) relationship with her. His objective is to let his daughter, no mention is made of any contact with Mar, know him and her paternal side of the family. Indeed, in *Oltre Babilonia*, all three parental figures, Maryam, Miranda, and Elias are fundamental in providing the link between the family of origin and its homeland to the adopted land of Italy and the identities that these young black women necessarily form there. The parents in *Oltre Babilonia* constitute the critical channel which passes down family history, as well as the History that has had significant repercussions on its members. Even though Elias does not try to excuse himself with Zuhra via recounting the horrors of his father’s rape by the Italian “peacekeepers” during Italy’s Trusteeship Administration of Somalia, nonetheless the event is central in elucidating his deficiencies as a father.



In addition to the gang rape of Elias, Zuhra's grandfather, by the "Italian civilizers," her mother, Maryam, narrates her own encounters with the colonists, another concrete example of a familial haunting ghost which will alter her ability to mother Zuhra. In the oral tradition of her homeland, Maryam recounts the painful family history on audiocassettes, to speak memories which are too arduous to share directly with her daughter. Maryam hopes to fill in the gaps of the family genealogy which has contributed to the paucity of emotional intimacy in her relationship with Zuhra. Specifically, Maryam relates to her daughter how her family of origin was destroyed during Italy's occupation of Somalia since her father was compelled by the Italians to serve as an *ascaro*<sup>131</sup> in their armed forces in combatting Ethiopia. He died as a result, leaving Maryam an orphan given that her mother died soon thereafter:

(Suo padre) fu costretto a uccidere la gente. Lui non ce l'aveva particolarmente con i vicini etiopi. Erano dei *gaal*, però chi se ne frega...non era compito suo convertirli...Ne aveva fatto tante battaglie, suo papà. Però non era morto in battaglia. Era stato un italiano, teoricamente della sua stessa parte, ad ammazzarlo. Stava pulendo l'arma, l'italiano, quando inavvertitamente un colpo partì. Molti discutono ancora sull'"inavvertitamente." Alcuni compagni d'arme sostengono che l'italiano era una carogna patentata e che il padre di Maryam Laamane avesse detto una parola che alla carogna non piaceva affatto. Colpo partito. Padre andato. Verità incerta. Per il dolore, la madre morì poco dopo di crepacuore. (Scego *Oltre* 108)

[He (her father) was forced to kill people. He didn't have it in for our neighbors, the Ethiopians. Sure they were *gaal* ("dirty infedels") but who gives a fuck?...It wasn't his job to convert them...Her daddy was in a lot of battles. But he didn't die in combat. It was an Italian, theoretically on his side, who murdered him. The Italian was cleaning his weapon when inadvertently a shot fired out. There is still a lot of debate about that "inadvertently." Some of his soldier buddies maintain that the Italian was a certified scum-bag and that Maryam Laamane's father had said something to him that he didn't like at all. (Anyway) the shot fired. Her father was gone. An uncertain truth. Because of her suffering, her mother died shortly thereafter from a broken heart.]

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<sup>131</sup> The *ascari* were indigenous soldiers, mostly Eritrean and Somalian, who were involuntarily recruited to serve by the Italians in their war against Ethiopia which has led to continued animosity between Somalia and Ethiopia. For a critical analysis of the figure of the *ascaro*, see pp. 109-116 in Scego's *Roma negata: Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (2014).

Orphaned as a small child, Maryam was brought up by her aunts and her grandmother. In her voice recordings to her daughter, she conveys the significant historical events which led to her suffering immigration to Italy, the “land of the whites”: how Siad Barre razed her hometown to the ground, thereby eliminating with one fell swoop the memories and places of her childhood. She comments that Barre had come to power by proclaiming a false ideology of communism: “Con la scusa del comunismo diceva che si era tutti uguali, ma che lui era più uguale degli altri e gli spettava di più, perché il paese non poteva fare a meno di lui.” [“With the excuse of communism, he said that we were all equal, but that he was more equal than everyone else and, therefore, he was entitled to more, because the country couldn’t do without him.”] (Scego *Oltre* 103) Rather, Maryam recognizes that Siad Barre was placed into power in 1969 by the Italian Trusteeship Administration who wrote Somalia’s independence “con il sangue dei somali” [“with the blood of the Somalian people.”] (Scego *Oltre* 103) Maryam’s bitter accounting of Barre’s regime recalls Fanon’s vehement warning of the “bourgeois phase” which typically follows independence in “undeveloped countries.” Fanon remarks that the falsely acquired power must frequently be sustained by police power and by political parties which purport to represent the interests of the masses, as was the case with Siad Barre, but which only “prolong the heritage of the colonial economy thinking and institutions.” (Fanon *Wretched* 120) Consonant with Fanon’s suppositions, in Scego’s novel, Maryam’s narrative provides an example of just this: how Barre’s dictatorship under the false moniker of communism appropriated and devastated one of the principal economies of Somalia, the banana plantations. These lands had been purchased by native persons after independence, at an “exorbitant cost from the Italians” she comments, who then formed cooperatives, thereby creating meaningful work for themselves and other co-nationals. However, as part of Barre’s “scientific socialism” in the Seventies, these same banana plantations were

reclaimed by the Italians and their corrupt Italian pawns which Maryam credits to the establishment of the Italian mafia in Somalia. Eventually, Maryam's husband, Elias, opposed the Barre regime by joining an underground group composed of individuals who felt defrauded by the false communism which deprived them of the ability to make a living. When Elias' "subversive" activity is discovered, his arrest and probable torture and death are imminent, thus, he and Maryam are forced to emigrate to Italy with their baby daughter, Zuhra. When she is grown, Zuhra, like her parents and grandfather before her, scoffs at the falsity of the myth of the white, European nation that "guides" their former African colonies to independence, democracy, and civilization by tracing the origins of the continuing civil war and anarchy in Somalia a half-century after its independence to its colonial past. To cite one example, Zuhra derides the nonsensical borders defined by the Westerner colonizers which do not respect the historical confines established millennia prior by the clans and she identifies these problematic boundaries as the source of continuing clan wars in Somalia as well as skirmishes with neighboring countries:

...è da 50 anni che siamo tutti (gli africani) liberi. Ma lo siamo davvero? Se guardo la cartina direi proprio di no...Se guardi (la cartina del)l'Europa, ci trovi le linee di confine tutte frastagliate e curve, se guardi (la mappa del)l'Africa vedi solo confini netti, dritti, tagliati con l'accetta. Lo vedi subito che sono fatti a tavolino dai bianchi... (Scego *Oltre* 453, my insertions)

[...It's been 50 years since all of us (the Africans) are free. But are we really? If you look at the map, I would say not... If you look at (a map of) Europe, you will find borders all curvy and jagged, but if you look at (a map of) Africa you can see only clear, straight boundaries, cleanly cut with an ax. You immediately recognize that they were drawn at a table by the whites...]

As for many political exiles from former colonies to Europe, Elias and Maryam's immigration to Italy does not solve the family's difficulties. First, Elias abandons his wife and daughter soon thereafter in Rome for unexplained reasons, akin to the story of Taageere and his first and second wives in *Madre piccola*. Left to care for an infant on her own in a country where she is black and a non-citizen, Maryam succumbs to loneliness, isolation, and eventually depression which she

anesthetizes with alcohol: "...già dalla mattina presto si faceva sedurre dalla trasparenza del gin." ["...already, from early in the morning, she let herself be seduced by the transparency of the gin."] (Scego *Oltre* 107) Her alcoholism predictably impedes her ability to mother Zuhra whom she situates in a Catholic boarding school in Rome. There, her daughter is raped at age eight for by the school janitor. Through psychotherapy, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and storytelling, but mostly thanks to her resolve to save her daughter, Maryam liberates herself eventually from alcohol dependence, hence her moniker *Pessottimista* in the novel, yet it takes decades. Free from the "seduction of gin," Maryam recognizes her own culpability in her daughter being sexually violated, as well as the significant role her alcoholism played in the distant rapport between the two:

Non si conoscevano bene quella madre e quella figlia. Tra loro solo passaggi obbligati: l'odore dell'utero, il latte del seno, qualche sguardo di rimprovero dopo una marachella. Le scene tra loro erano poche, quelle poche molto offuscate. Da adolescente la figlia aveva visto la madre persa dietro una bottiglia di gin puro. Una madre vinta dall'odore dell'esilio. Una madre che in quel paese nuovo, l'Italia, aveva abbandonato ogni suo principio e ogni suo sogno. Quella madre aveva sofferto molto. Sapeva di aver fatto soffrire. (Scego *Oltre* 347)

[They didn't know each other very well, that mother and daughter. Between them, there were only the obligatory passages: the smell of her uterus, the milk from her breast, disapproving looks after a little mischief. The encounters between them were few, and those few were blurry. As an adolescent, the daughter had seen her mother behind a bottle of pure gin. A mother defeated from the odor of exile. A mother who, in that new country in Italy, had abandoned all of her principles and all of her dreams. That mother had suffered a lot. And she knew that she had been the cause of suffering.]

Literary scholar, Viviam Gerrand, characterizes Maryam's condition as "existentially homeless": being both racially marginalized and politically precarious in Italy. Paradoxically, Maryam, like other Somalian (and Eritrean, Libyan, and Ethiopian) refugees, is not recognized as an ex-colonial subject by the Italian State. Thus, she is "disenfranchised" of her citizenship rights, nor is she conceded social acceptance. (Gerrand 273, 288, Curti 33) The author, Scego, coins a

neologism which refers to the sense of existential homelessness experienced by the Somalian diaspora, *dismatria*, which could be translated as “loss of the mother country” or “separation from the homeland.” In her homonymous short story (2005), Scego equates *dismatria* to a physiological and psychological separation from one’s mother due to severing of the “umbilical cord.” In the short story, the family’s eternally-packed suitcase serves as a metaphor for the longed for, yet impossible dream of returning to the motherland, in Somalia:

Ogni membro della famiglia aveva in verità le sue valigie e naturalmente ci metteva dentro la sua esistenza...Mamma diceva sempre: “Se teniamo tutte le nostre cose in valigia, dopo non ci sarà bisogno di farle in fretta e furia.” Il “dopo” sottolineava un qualche tempo non definito nel futuro quando saremmo tornati trionfalmente nel seno di mamma Africa...Eravamo in continua attesa di un ritorno alla madrepatria che probabilmente non ci sarebbe mai stato. Il nostro incubo si chiamava *dismatria*...Eravamo dei *dismatriati*, qualcuno—forse per sempre—aveva tagliato il cordone ombelicale che ci legava alla nostra *matria*, alla Somalia. E chi è orfano di solito che fa? Sogna. E così facevamo noi...Nel cuore però portavamo il tormento degli esuli. In cuor nostro sapevamo che saremmo più tornati nella nostra Somalia, perché di fatto non esisteva più la nostra Somalia. (Scego “Dismatria” 9-11, author’s cursive and quotation marks)

[In truth, each member of the family had his own suitcases and, naturally, put inside them his/her existence...Mamma always said: “If we keep all our things in the suitcase, afterwards, we won’t have to pack up (to leave Italy) in a hurry.” This “afterwards” stood for some time in the undefined future when we would return with triumph to the breast of our mother Africa...We were always waiting for the return to the mother-country that probably would never be. Our nightmare was called *dismatria*...We were *dismatriati*, somebody—forever perhaps—had cut the umbilical cord that tied us to our *motherland*, to Somalia. And what does an orphan typically do? S/he dreams. And so did we...In our heart, however, we carried the torment of exiles. In our heart, we knew that we would never return to our Somalia because, in fact, our Somalia no longer existed.]

Scego likens *dismatria* to a perpetual “nightmare” state in that the refugee is like an orphan who dreams perennially to return to the mother which will never occur because the mother is dead, as was Maryam’s Somalia. This sense of *dismatria*, homelessness, separation from the motherland, in short, diaspora, plays a significant role in Maryam’s depression and resultant alcoholism, patently affecting her ability to mother Zuhra. *Dismatria*, the severing of the life-giving umbilical cord to the mother and its consequential state of malaise and perpetual sense of longing, is a

prevalent *topos* in Scego's works. It is found as well in her autobiographical novel, *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010). Akin to Maryam's experience, Scego recounts the same sense of *dismatria* suffered by her own mother upon immigration to Italy. As opposed to the metaphor of the severed umbilical cord, here the protagonist, speaking of her mother, likens *dismatria* to a mutilation of self, a stripping of one's identity, and to a disembowelment of hope:

(La mia mamma) Non può tornare, non può dissetare la sua angoscia. L'esule è una creatura a metà. Le radici sono strappate, la vita è stata mutilata, la speranza è stata sventrata, il principio è stato separato, l'identità è stata spogliata. Sembra non esserci rimasto niente. (Scego *Casa* 60, my insertion)

[(My mom) She can't go back, she can't assuage her anguish. The exile is a being (cut in) half. Your roots are ripped up, your life is mutilated, your hope is destroyed, you are cut off from your origins, your identity is stripped. It seems like nothing remains.]

Consequential to Maryam's sense of *dismatria*, of her existential homelessness as a black political refugee in Italy, is her alcoholism which leads to perhaps the most distressing account in *Oltre Babilonia*: the rape of her daughter, Zuhra, when she is only eight years old by the white janitor in a Catholic boarding school in Rome. Of all of the five narrative voices who alternately speak in the novel, Zuhra's story is privileged: her voice constitutes the Prologue and the Epilogue of the work and she is the only one of the five protagonists who narrates in first person, unless the discourse is in the form of letters or voice recordings by her parents which are intended for her.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, Zuhra's narrative is situated in the "present" in the novel, while the parental voices consist of flashbacks to significant memories and episodes in their past which are intended for their daughter's edification: the interplay of Zuhra's present with her parents' past, particularly their experiences with Italian colonial and postcolonial history in Somalia, underlines the continuity between the past and the present at both social-political and personal levels. The

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<sup>132</sup> The only exception is when another mother, Miranda, writes letters to her own daughter, Mar, the other offspring of Elias, adopting the first person. However, this study focuses on the story of Zuhra which the author privileges as explained.

centrality of the rape of eight-year old Zuhra to the narrative is highlighted by its presentation on the first pages of the Prologue and the frequent references to it throughout the novel. Zuhra was compelled to call her rapist “zio” [“uncle”], and she recalls him as: “...quello ‘zio’ dalla pelle squamata...Mi inondava di quella sua schiuma bianca e rideva come un pazzo.” [“...that ‘uncle’ with the scaly skin...He flooded me with his white foam and laughed like a lunatic.”] (Scego *Oltre* 22) The uncle/custodian violated Zuhra for five years in succession yet, like many children who are sexually assaulted, she never told anyone since: “...in collegio nessuno crede mai a noi bambine.” [“...in the boarding school, no one believed us little girls.”] (Scego *Oltre* 286) As an adult, Zuhra recognizes that both her rape and the fact that the “suoracce” [“the evil nuns”] were oblivious to her conspicuous distress were at least partially explainable by her race and nationality: “Al collegio (le suore) erano delle mezzeseghe. Non distinguevano un nero dall’altro.” [“At the school, (the teachers/nuns) were jerk-offs. They couldn’t tell one black apart from another.”] (Scego *Oltre* 286, my insertion) Recalling the verbal and psychological abuse that Carla Macoggi’s protagonist suffered under the care of nuns in the convent in Bologna, Zuhra and her fellow African-heritage classmates are berated by the sisters in the boarding school in Rome: “‘Voi zulu non avete proprio estro (per la poesia)!’ Mi chiamava sempre zulu quella soraccia.” [“‘You Zulus have no imagination (for poetry)!’ She always called me Zulu, that nun bitch.”] (Scego *Oltre* 282, my insertion) In addition to degrading the intelligence of their African diaspora students under their tutelage, none of the teachers or sisters pay attention to much less protect Zuhra from the predation of the uncle/rapist until her bedsheets are stained with copious blood. Her *de facto* aunt and caretaker, her mother’s best friend who had been raped as a child herself, recognizes the by-now thirteen-year old girl’s distress and rescues Zuhra from the school. She brings her home to

her mother who is paralyzed by her own culturally- and politically-induced melancholy which presents as nostalgia, depression, and alcoholism.

Being repeatedly raped throughout her childhood leaves significant scars on Zuhra: “Il male non è stato fatto solo al corpo...ma anche all’anima. La mia anima è tessuto poroso di dolore.” [“The harm wasn’t done only to my body...but also to my soul. My soul is a porous fabric made of pain.”] (Scego *Oltre* 231) *Oltre Babilonia* presents Zuhra’s victimization as being permitted by her being a defenseless black child in an Italian boarding school where her innate humanity is not recognized nor protected; it is owed as well to her desertion by her father and her depressed, alcoholic mother. Zuhra’s body and soul manifests what could be described as Post Rape Traumatic Syndrome:<sup>133</sup> as one common manifestation of the syndrome, she suffers from frequent panic attacks into adulthood, most typically when she is touched or feels threatened by a man which triggers memories of the odious “uncle”:

Quando sto molto male all’anima, mi succede. Tremo. Il dottor Ross (la psicologa) ha detto che è normale in casi come il mio...Non ho l’epilessia. Ma ho le crisi. Come se fossi una vera epilettica...(Io e il mio corpo) Balliamo. Tremiamo. Dalla mano la scossa si estende al petto, alla pancia, al viso. Oh sì, anche lì arriva la crisi. Il mio viso si deforma. Il trucco si scioglie. La bocca non riesco più a chiuderla. La lingua si arrotola. Riesco a portare le mani al petto. Chiedo aiuto. Non si sente. (Scego *Oltre* 336, 343, 345, my insertions)

[When I feel bad in my soul, it happens to me. I tremble. Doctor Ross (the psychologist) said that it’s normal in cases like mine...I don’t have epilepsy. But I have crises. As if I were a true epileptic...(My body and I) We dance. We tremble. From my hands, the tremor extends to my chest, my belly, my face. Oh yes, the crisis arrives also there. My face contorts. My make-up melts. I’m not able to close my mouth. My tongue rolls up. I’m able to bring my hands to my chest. I ask for help. But no one hears.]

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<sup>133</sup> See footnote #128 for a clinical description of the hallmarks of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as related to rape. In comparison to her grandfather, Zuhra’s manifestations of Post Rape Traumatic Syndrome, a subcategory of PTSD, are mostly in the affective realm and result in decades of depression. Like her grandfather, she seems to experience “dissociative reactions” or “flashbacks” in which she re-lives the event sporadically, particularly when triggered by unwelcome advances by the opposite sex, real or perceived, which negatively impacts her sexuality and identity as a woman, as it did for him. Zuhra’s “erroneous cognitions” include her generalization of all men as threatening and dangerous who wish to do her harm. The *DSM-5* notes that one-third to more than half of rape survivors have PTSD. Moreover, the manual explains that other psycho-affective disorders are frequently comorbid with PTSD: 80% of PTSD patients have concomitant diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders, as is the case for Zuhra in the “loss of her colors,” depression, up until age thirty. (*DSM-5* 265-290)



In addition to the continuing panic attacks, at thirty years old Zuhra has been depressed for than ten years: “Non godo. Nemmeno dell’aria godo.” [“I don’t enjoy anything. I don’t enjoy even the air.”] (Scego *Oltre* 339) Her depression is presented from the first pages of the novel and constitutes one of the central problems to resolve in the novel:

Arginai le lacrime per farle straripare dopo, quando sarei stata sola nell’intimità del cesso di casa mia. Piansi tanto, poi soffocai le urla e mi accorsi solo allora che non avevo più i colori, li avevo persi tutto...Ho camminato così nella mia vita, quasi senza accorgermene. Mondi pallidi, occhi vitrei, trasparenza sleale. La cosa è andata così per un decennio o poco più. (Scego *Oltre* 8-9)

[I checked my tears only to let them overflow afterwards, when I would be alone in the intimacy of my bathroom at home. I cried so much, then I would suffocate my screams, and only then did I notice that I had lost my colors...I carried on this way in my life, almost without noticing it. A pale world, glassy eyes, duplicitous transparency. Things went on like this for a decade or a little longer.]

Zuhra conceives of her melancholy as “losing her colors,” an efficacious metaphor for the hopelessness which is characteristic of depression. She explains that vivid hues signify her hopes and dreams for the future: “Rivoglio indietro tutti i miei colori, capito? Tutti i sogni.” [“I want all my colors back, understand? All my dreams.”] (Scego *Oltre* 232) One color in particular is missing, red, which implies love and the ability to give life. (Scego *Oltre* 9, 10, 12, 272) In regard to the color red, the Prologue of *Oltre Babilonia* opens with the menstruation of the protagonist and is reminiscent of the initial scene in Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* (1998). In Maraini’s novel, the protagonist describes the arrival of her monthly cycle as: “Mi sono svegliata con una fitta, un dolore sordo e fondo. Qualcosa di caldo mi bagnava le cosce. Ho cacciato una mano sotto la gonna. L’ho ritirata macchiata di sangue.” [“I woke up with a pang, a dull and deep pain. Something warm was soaking my thighs. I stuck my hand under my skirt. I pulled it back out stained with blood.”] (Maraini 3-4) Yet the psychological perception of the arrival of the monthly

cycle is widely divergent in the two protagonists which reflects their diverse views of their rapport with their body and their sexuality: Maraini's protagonist, Vanna, perceives her menstrual blood as "benefico" ["healthy, desirable"] and matter-of-factly places her hand on/in her vagina to confirm the arrival of her cycle. Instead, Zuhra is saddened and frightened by its presence, and longs for menopause at age thirty:

...ne avevo molta paura (delle mestruazioni)...Non dicevo nulla. Non le nominavo proprio. Mi illudevo che non nominandole sarebbero sparite dalla mia vita per sempre. Sognavo una menopausa perenne...Ogni volta che venivano, ogni volta che vedevo le mutande sporche mi rattristavo. Era più forte di me, mi rattristavo. Guardavo le mutande, la carta igienica e mi rattristavo. (Scego *Oltre* 16-17, my insertion)

[...I was really afraid of them (the menstrual cycles)...I didn't ever say anything. I didn't even name them. I fooled myself that by not naming them, they would disappear from my life for always. I dreamed of a perennial menopause...Every time they came, every time that I saw my dirty underwear, I was saddened. It was stronger than me, I grew sad. I looked at my underwear, the toilet paper, and I grew sad.]

Unlike Maraini's protagonist, Vanna, who readily puts her hand between her legs and describes her menstruation in matter-of-fact terms of its wholesome, life-giving potential, Zuhra loathes both the fertility of her body as well as the prospect of touching herself so much so that she cannot insert a tampon to stop the flow of blood. At thirty-years old, she has never introduced anything voluntarily into her vagina, much less a penis. Having not examined or touched herself for so long, she wonders if her "figa" ["pussy"] is covered in "ragnatele" ["cobwebs"], and she conceptualizes it as a "mostro" ["monster"]. (Scego *Oltre* 21, 177) Highlighting the detachment from her corporeal self, Zuhra cannot even see the red blood, perceiving it instead as grey: "Mi hanno detto che le mestruazioni hanno il color del sangue, mi hanno detto che è sangue...Quando le guardo sulle mie mutande vedo solo un punto di grigio." ["They told me that menstruations have the color of blood, they told me that it is blood...When I look at them on my underwear, I see only a spot of grey."] (Scego *Oltre* 17) In addition to repressing her sexuality by avoiding contact with her

body and detesting its natural functions, Zuhra further suppresses her femaleness by her mode of dress, wearing only baggy clothes which hide her shape, and by shaving her head:

Mamma non sopporta i miei capelli perennemente corti. “Ci sto comoda, Ma” le dico. Lei scuote la testa. Non ci crede, non ci credo nemmeno io. Mamma mi conosce bene, sa che con i capelli lunghi sarei più felice. È che mamma sa che ho paura di essere donna, a volte. È per quello che mi è successo al collegio da piccola. Mi hanno fatto sentire sporca, in quel collegio maledetto. Mamma lo sa, per questo vorrebbe che mi facessi crescere i capelli. Per tornare a credere nella donna che ho dentro. Anche il dottor Ross (la psicologa) è d’accordo con mamma sui capelli. Dice che sotto, però, c’è una bambina che soffoca la donna che sono diventata. La bambina desidera amore, ma io lo impedisco. (Scego *Oltre* 171-172, my insertion)

[Mamma can’t stand my perennially short hair. “I’m comfortable like this, Ma,” I tell her. She shakes her head. She doesn’t believe it, I don’t even believe it. Mamma knows me well and she knows that with longer hair I would be happier. It’s just that Mamma knows that I’m afraid of being a woman, sometimes. It’s because of what happened to me in that boarding school when I was little. They made me feel dirty in that damned boarding school. Mamma knows it and, for this, she wishes that I would let my hair grow. To start believing again in the woman that I have inside. Also Doctor Ross (the psychologist) agrees with my mom about my hair. She says that underneath, however, there’s a little girl who suffocates the woman I’ve become. The little girl craves love, but I block it.]

Zuhra’s abhorrence of her menstruations, the avoidance of contact with her vagina, her perception of a tampon as a painful, threatening “strumento chirurgico” [“surgical instrument”], the shearing of her head, and the cloaking of her body “da monaca” [“like a nun”]—“Amo le mie tute, i miei jeans, i pantaloni larghi grigio perla” [“I love my sweat pants, my jeans, my large pearl-gray pants”]—all represent Zuhra’s negation and suppression of mature female sexuality. (Scego *Oltre* 21, 42, 233) The denial of her corporeality comprehensibly finds origins in her androphobia, her deep-seated anxiety and terror of men and sexual intercourse. Zuhra perceives men as ravenous, aggressive predators: “...(i loro sguardi) questi vanno oltre l’epidermide, fanno direttamente un RX torace, gambe, schiena. Ti contano le vertebre, vedono fluire il sangue nelle arterie, ti palpa la milza con occhio vogliosi.” [“...(their gazes) go beyond the epidermis, they X-ray directly your thorax, legs, and back. They count your vertebrae, they watch the blood flowing in your arteries, they palpate your spleen with their hungry eyes.”] (Scego *Oltre* 233) To avoid

men who want to her “eat her like a beignet,” Zuhra frequents gay men who don’t desire her sexually and, therefore, can’t hurt her. Her friendships with homosexual male friends<sup>134</sup> are fundamental for learning the social codes of sex that she never mastered, even at age thirty, given that her only experience with sexual intercourse is having been raped as a child: “Io poi, con i gay ci vado molto d’accordo, sono simpatici e sono gli unici a raccontarti per filo e per segno come si scopa. Se non ci fossero loro, forse io del corpo maschile non saprei proprio un bel niente.” [“I get along really well with the gays; they’re likeable and they’re the only ones who’ll tell you for chapter and verse how to screw. If it weren’t for them, probably I wouldn’t know really anything about the male body.”] (Scego *Oltre* 13) Zuhra’s alternate habitual solution for rapport with the opposite sex is to fall in love with men who are like “muri” [“walls”], closed, stubborn, emotionally distant, therefore innocuous. (Scego *Oltre* 231) (Unconsciously) choosing to form relationships with men “con cui non posso costruire niente” [“with whom I can’t build anything”], Zuhra protects herself from intimacy, thus, intercourse, revealing her “paura del pene” [“fear of the penis”], “penis” being synonymous with “violence” according to her psychologist. (Scego *Oltre* 231) The “disturbances” suffered by Zuhra as a childhood rape victim are prevalent in the psychiatric literature. For example, Zuhra’s self-described “loss of colors” or depression was reported in Koss and Harvey’s *The Rape Victim: Clinical and Community Interventions* (1991): nearly half (44%) of rape victims had Beck Depression Inventory scores<sup>135</sup> in the moderately or severely depressed range; 38% of them met the criteria for major depressive disorder, and 33 to

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<sup>134</sup> For a reflection on *Oltre Babilonia*’s engagement with non-heteronormative sexuality as a response to rape, see Simone Brioni, see “The Somali Italian Borderland in *Oltre Babilonia*” (2015), pp. 134-137.

<sup>135</sup> The Beck Depression Inventory, first published in 1961 then updated in 1978 and 1996, is a checklist used to assess whether an individual is depressed or not, as well as the severity of the depression. It is widely utilized in psychiatric and psychology settings.

50% had thoughts of suicide. (Koss and Harvey 61-62) Another study, Comijs *et al.*'s "Childhood Abuse in Late-Life Depression" (2013), found that the majority of adults who had been abused as children suffered depression even in old age: 53.3%, were clinically depressed in late life compared to 16% in the control population, demonstrating that the effects of childhood abuse were lifelong.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, the most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* (2013), the so-called *DSM-5* which is the definitive text in psychiatric diagnostic guidelines, supports these studies, claiming that nearly 80% of rape victims who suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder have comorbid depression or anxiety disorders.<sup>137</sup> (*DSM-5* 280)

In addition to the prevalence of depression in sexual assault victims, androphobia, fear of men, and hapnophobia, fear of being touched, are experienced by Zuhra as well and are common manifestations of Post Rape Traumatic Syndrome. The previously mentioned monograph by Koss and Harvey (1991) reported that sexual disorders are "among the most long-lasting problems experienced by rape victims...More than half (59%) of the sexual assault victims had at least one

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<sup>136</sup> Comijs' *et al.* article, "Childhood Abuse in Late-Life Depression," is considered a landmark study in the correlation between childhood abuse and depression in adults. In the study group who was between 60 and 93 years old, Comijs and her colleagues found that 41.5% of individuals who had experienced emotional neglect as children were depressed in old age, as were 26.3% of the psychologically abused during childhood, 34% of those who had experienced sexual abuse, and 16 % of those who had experienced physical abuse. The likelihood of depression increased significantly with the number of episodes and the frequency of the abuse. In the case of Zuhra in *Oltre Babilonia*, she recounts being raped for nearly a decade, from age eight to thirteen years old, by the school janitor, thus, her depression which she perceives as "losing her colors," "not enjoying even the air," is a predictable response to the violence she suffered. Among other reasons, Comijs' study is significant in demonstrating the lifelong effects on mood of childhood abuse in its various forms. (Comijs *et al.* 241-246)

<sup>137</sup> Another important study on sexual abuse and mood disorders is Jutta Lindert *et al.*'s "Sexual and Physical Abuse in Childhood is Associated with Depression and Anxiety of the Life Course" (2014). The authors performed a meta-analysis, an extensive review of the literature, of all the articles that were published between 2000 and 2012 on the association between child sexual or physical abuse and depression or anxiety in adulthood. With an impressive total sample size of 115,579 individuals, they found that childhood victims of physical or sexual abuse had a greatly increased incidence of depression at any point in the life cycle, with sexual abuse conferring a burden double that of physical abuse. Moreover, Lindert *et al.* put forth the hypothesis that these types of abuse can have significant deleterious physiological effects on developing brains, modifying permanently the regions that process fear and anxiety. They note that even though the pernicious effects of physical and sexual abuse during childhood have been well documented since the Nineteen Sixties, its rate continue to increase worldwide. (Lindert *et al.* 359-372)

sexual dysfunction compared to 17% of the non-victims.” (Koss and Harvey 63-64) A more recent text, *Depression: Integrating Science, Culture and Humanities* (2012), embraces a larger perspective than the pathologizing medical model of childhood victimization and resultant psycho-affective “disorders.” Nonetheless, its author, psychiatrist and cultural studies scholar Bradley Lewis, confirmed that early childhood abuse, particularly physical and sexual trauma like that suffered by Zuhra, significantly increases the risk of melancholy/depression as well as sexual “disorders.” (Bradley Lewis 9) However, consonant with the thesis of this study that depression and other manifestations of psycho-affective distress are “normal” reactions to racism, dehumanization, gendered-, racially-, and or nationally-based violence on vulnerable persons, Lewis frames depression in his work as an “expected” and typical response to political, social, economic, and interpersonal difficulties.

Related to her fear of sexuality, Zuhra punishes her body with its stains of (perceived) dishonor through bulimia. In adolescence, she recalls devouring mass quantities of donuts or huge, “pachidermica” [“pachydermic”] steaks only to vomit it all up immediately afterwards. (Scego *Oltre* 18) She ceases purging herself of food only when she recognizes the enormous financial cost to her single mother. Yet, even as an adult and no longer bulimic, Zuhra acknowledges her continuing “disordered” eating habits, reporting that she frequently “dimenticarmi di mangiare.” “forgets to eat.” (Scego *Oltre* 19) Eating disorders are fairly common defense mechanisms adopted by rape victims who (un)consciously starve and/or purge themselves of food in an attempt at self-

purification from feeling dirty or contaminated.<sup>138</sup> Anorexia nervosa<sup>139</sup> in particular, characterized by self-imposed severe weight loss resulting in a Body Mass Index significantly below the healthy range, is perceived by sexual violence victims as an effective means to repudiate one's sexuality. Related to Zuhra's employment of baggy clothing and head shaving to hide her femaleness, being extremely thin and having pre-adolescent, boy-like proportions is a defense mechanism employed by rape survivors to avoid the unwanted attention and aggression of men. In a landmark work on eating disorders in women in contemporary Western society, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body* (1993), Susan Bordo conceives of anorexia and bulimia as a means via which women discipline themselves, particularly if they have been raped.<sup>140</sup> Withholding food and or willfully expelling it is a way to punish oneself, expiating the "sin" of the sexual assault as well as reshape the body, rendering it more androgynous and less sexual:

Women and girls frequently internalize this ideology (that women's bodies "speak a language of provocation"), holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assault. This guilt festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self-loathing. For example, anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or

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<sup>138</sup> In the psychiatric manual, *Handbook of Eating Disorders: Physiology, Psychology, and Treatment of Obesity, Anorexia, and Bulimia* (1986), physicians Brownell and Foreyt observe that victims of childhood sexual violence often view their bodies as repulsive and attempt to cleanse themselves by purging. They cite a case study in which one woman reports: "I felt dirty and ashamed of my body. I felt like I wanted to 'clean my body out' and became interested in health foods and exercise. I wanted to purify my body and make it perfect. I started a diet and became obsessed with controlling my body. I wanted to make my body 'sacred' but instead ended up being bulimic." This reference does not condone a pathological, medical model for bulimia, but is utilized to note the correlation between childhood rape and eating disorders. (Brownell and Foreyt 485-486, 493)

<sup>139</sup> According to the National Eating Disorders Organization, a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa requires meeting the following criteria: "Restriction of energy intake relative to requirements leading to a significantly low body weight in the context of age, sex, developmental trajectory, and physical health. Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight. Disturbance in the way in which one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight." [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/anorexia](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/anorexia)

<sup>140</sup> It is important to note that Bordo does not consider sexual violence as the only and not even as the most common "cause" of eating disorders. In fact, she does not frame anorexia and bulimia as a medical psychopathology at all, but as a "normal" reaction to the ubiquitous cultural representations and expectations of the expected female prototypical body. (Bordo 54) Bordo asserts that all women suffer from varying degrees of eating disorders, citing that 95% of women overestimate their body size and 75% view themselves as "fat." (Bordo 54-56, 61)

humiliation, can be seen at least in part as a defense against the “femaleness” of the body and a punishment of its desires. (Bordo 8, my insertion)

Returning to Fanon’s psychiatric case studies with their etiology in colonial violence, Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia* makes a strong case for politically, culturally, and historically-induced melancholy. The novel demonstrates clearly the cause-and-effect of events linked to Italy’s colonialism in Somalia, the continuation of the hegemonic categories of race and nation fabricated during the colonial period which are perpetuated in the so-called postcolonial period, and the resultant physical and psycho-affective trauma on multiple generations of a family. Beginning with Majid, Zuhra’s paternal grandfather, his humiliating, emasculating gang rape by Italian and German soldiers during Italy’s Trusteeship Administration of Somalia (1950-1960) led to his debilitating depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, negated sexuality, and the consequential abandonment of his family. In the successive generation, his son Elias participates in a movement of young Somalians against Siad Barre, the military dictator placed into power by the Italians, which puts his life in peril. For this reason, to save himself and his young family, Elias emigrates with them to Italy. Yet, like his father before him, Elias abandons his wife and baby daughter which he attributes, at least in part, to his own father’s detachment and desertion of him; subsequently, he fathers another child out of wedlock whom he never meets. The void of Elias, *il padre*, leaves a gaping hole in his daughters’ familial history as well as their need for a father, both factors contribute to their respective identity crises. His discarded wife, Maryam, attempts unsuccessfully to medicate with alcohol her sense of *dismatria*, her exile in unwelcoming Italy, which renders her unfit to care for her child whom she places in a Catholic boarding school in Rome. There, Zuhra, essentially an orphan, is raped for most of her childhood, from age eight to thirteen. Consequently, she struggles for her entire young adult life with the repercussions of Post Rape Traumatic Syndrome which include in her case: depression which she perceives as a “loss



of my colors,” inability to establish a healthy adult female sexuality and sexual identity, panic attacks which she denominates as her “crisi,” and an eating disorder. The violence perpetrated on Zuhra can be explained by her vulnerability to sexual victimization in white Italy, owing to her race, gender, and perceived ethnicity as African as demonstrated by studies in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and family therapy.<sup>141</sup> A study by Walker *et al.* (2012) demonstrated that sexual abuse during childhood plays a significant role in the development of one’s sexual identity, one of the principal manifestations in Scego’s protagonist. They hold that:

Many factors affect how individuals develop a healthy sexual identity, including internal processes, societal forces, family pressures, and other external societal influences that an individual has little to no control over. One such external influence is being a victim of sexual abuse, particularly during childhood when an individual may have not yet begun the process of sexual identity formation, or is at the very beginning of that process. This type of traumatic childhood experience could have serious and lasting detrimental effects on an individual’s sense of self and control over one’s body, as well as interfere with being able to later embrace one’s sexuality in healthy and adaptive ways, ultimately affecting the ability to securely attach and be part of healthy and loving close relationships. (Walker *et al.* 391)

They continue that, as is true in Zuhra’s case, being sexually violated as a child not only interferes with sexual identity, it is portentous in developing future intimate relationships and can lead to long term, if not lifelong, sexual dysfunction. (Walker *et al.* 391) Another study by trauma counselors, Phillips and Daniluk’s “Beyond ‘Survivor:’ How Childhood Sexual Abuse Informs the Identity of Adult Women at the End of the Therapeutic Process” (2004), found that a history of rape during childhood significantly and permanently affects one’s identity as well as worldview:<sup>142</sup> they reported that most of the women in the study who ranged from 30 to 57 years

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<sup>141</sup> Monique Walker *et al.’s* “Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Identity Formation: Intersection of Gender, Race, and Sexual Orientation” (2012) asserts that belonging to “multiple marginalized statuses,” as is the case for Zuhra who is Black, female, of Somalian heritage, poor, and fatherless, significantly increases her vulnerability to sexual victimization. (Walker *et al.* 388, 392)

<sup>142</sup> Phillips and Daniluk’s “Beyond ‘Survivor:’ How Childhood Sexual Abuse Informs the Identity of Adult Women at the End of the Therapeutic Process” (2004) identifies several common themes in difficult identity formation in adult

old described years in which they had a “contaminated identity, in which “invisibility,” “self-loathing” and “shame” were central characteristics of their self-perception. In addition, they perceived the world in general as a “hostile and dangerous place,” recurrent themes in Zuhra’s narrative with her vigilant guard against the danger of men which represent only potential sexual violence. Consonant as well with Zuhra’s experience, the most long-lasting repercussions of childhood sexual abuse were the impact on the women’s sexuality, their rapport with their body, and their sense of freedom in intimate relationships. Phillips and Daniluk reported that: “The women talked about continuing to struggle with sexual intimacy and reflected on their belief that the loss of their capacity for sexual spontaneity and joy might well be one of the permanent legacies of their sexual abuse experience.” (Phillips and Daniluk 177-184) This is the case for Zuhra who, at age thirty, is still a “virgin,” having never made love or had a significant romantic relationship. Importantly, Phillips and Daniluk reported that a significant passage in the healing process from childhood sexual abuse was “de-personalizing” the abuse, putting it instead into a “broader social and political perspective.” (Phillips and Daniluk 177-184) In effect, salient steps in Zuhra’s recovery involve recognizing the failure of the adults who should have protected her from being raped for a half-decade as a child, including her mother and the “suoracce” [“bitch nuns”] in the boarding school: “...(la psicologa) mi costringe a parlare male di mia mamma. Lo so, non è perfetta. È un po’ bambina...Devo ammettere con me stessa che la mamma ha un po’ di colpa (per lo stupro)...” [“...(the psychologist) compels me to speak badly about my mom. I know, she’s not perfect. She’s kind of like a little girl...I have to admit to myself that my mom has a little bit of

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women who had suffered incest and/or sexual abuse as a child: self-definition/identity and acceptance of self; sense of visibility (versus invisibility) and ability to connect to others; change in worldview; residual losses in terms of what had been lost (disintegrated and/or distorted family memories, continuing effects on sexuality). A limitation of their study is that the sample size of childhood rape survivors was only seven individuals; this was purposeful on the part of the authors in order to utilize a qualitative, phenomenological method in which hours were spent interviewing each survivor and analyzing their responses. (Phillips and Daniluk 177-184)

fault (for my being raped)...”] (Scego *Oltre* 343, my insertions) Moreover, an important passage for Zuhra in healing, as Phillips and Daniluk identify, is her recognition of the role that race, gender, and nationality played in her vulnerability, placing the violence that she suffered in the larger framework of cultural and political ills. She reports that, in all of her childhood in Italy, she could only identify one teacher who had been kind to her and who didn’t treat her cruelly because of her color:

L’unica persona buona della mia infanzia, la Morabito (una maestra). Era paziente e a lei non importava se ero nera. Non mi chiamava Kunta Kinte come le bidelle stronze. Per loro io ero solo la sporca negra, non vedevano altro di me, “manco la varecchina basta a lavatte” dicevano. Bidelle stronze quelle delle elementari...Solo la Morabito era buona. (Scego *Oltre* 399, my insertion)

[The only good person of my entire childhood, Ms. Morabito (an elementary school teacher). She was patient and she didn’t care if I was black. She didn’t call me Kunte Kinte like the bitch school assistants. For them, I was only a dirty little nigger girl, they didn’t see anything else about me, “not even bleach would be enough to clean you,” they said. Those asshole teachers’ assistants at the elementary school...Only Ms. Morabito was good (to me).]

As demonstrated in Zuhra’s disheartening account of racism, experienced as a child nonetheless, the “haunting presence of the colonial” is proposed by Good and Good in their *Postcolonial Disorders* (2008), a term which they adopt to refer to the enduring ghosts/remnants of colonial history. Born of a two-year series of seminars on Medical Anthropology and Cultural Psychiatry at Harvard University, the goal of the lectures was to “re-examine thinking on race, ethnicity, and culture.” (Good *et al.* 5) The scholars define the current era as “postcolonial” which does not refer chronologically to “after” the colonial period as “post” implies, but phenomenologically to the lived experience of individuals who are subjected to an “era and a historical legacy of violence and appropriation, carried into the present as traumatic memory, inherited institutional structures, and often unexamined assumptions.” (Good *et al.* 6) Similar to arguments put forth by Fanon forty years prior, Good and Good emphasize that the fundamental

goal of colonialism was to “establish and maintain a distinctive (world) order” based on a hierarchy of the European and the “Other,” the latter being equated with “the mad, the primitive, and the bestial” which justified domination and violence during colonialism. (Good *et al.* 7, my insertion)

Nonetheless, the authors assert that colonialism did not end with the independence of the colonized countries, patent in the case of Somalia, but persists yet today in what they call “disorderly states,” that is, world powers that perpetrate “disorder” in the previously colonized. (Good *et al.* 8) It is important to note that Good *et al.*, like Ann Cvetkovich and Bradley Lewis, distance themselves from the medicalizing term “disorder” since it reproduces the inferior status and the pathology assigned to the racialized Other. Instead, they privilege the terms “social suffering” or “social pathology,” similar to Cvetkovich and the Public Feelings Project’s model of “political depression.” (Good *et al.* 10-11) They hold that “disordered states,” with the continuity of power relations established during colonialism, are responsible for and causal in the psycho-affective disturbances/sufferings identified in marginalized individuals. Recalling Cvetkovich’s association of the public/political spheres with the private/psychological realms, Good *et al.*’s *Postcolonial Disorders* (2008) purposes to draw attention to the “devastating injuries that social force inflicts on human experience” with often transgenerational legacies as is demonstrated in Scego’s novel.

The scholars find hermeneutic Derrida’s concept of “hauntology” which they describe as “the ghosts of the tortured and the dead around the world...(give rise to the) states and their disorders or traumatic memory...(that) shape subjective lives.” (Good *et al.* 15) In Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia*, the specter of Majid’s gang rape haunts at least two successive generations of his family in devastating ways. In a similar vein to Good *et al.*, Hesse and Sayyid in “Narrating the Postcolonial Political and the Immigrant Imaginary” (2008) trouble the seemingly conclusive shade of the appellation “postcolonial.” They argue that “post” in this case does not equate with the passing of

colonialism and its constructs. Instead, these structures are now normalized and reproduced in the present, held as inherently and incontrovertibly “real,” their historical and political underpinnings being erased:

...what we refer to as the postcolonial is not to be understood empirically...as endings of empire as a formal regime or set of institutions, but conceptually as a way of narrating the deregulated presences of past economic, political, and cultural colonialities transformed within the postcolonial present to naturalise and depoliticise the world order (*e.g.*, the world economic and political hegemony of the United States and European Union; Third World poverty). In other words, the postcolonial describes the limitations and incompleteness of anterior decolonization...(which is evidenced by) Western practices of normalizing, disavowing and depoliticizing the contemporary colonial architecture of the world order. (Hesse and Sayyid 16-17, their insertion)

The “case history” of Zuhra’s rape presented in Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia* provides ample, concrete proof of the shortcomings of decolonization in contemporary Italy, its “limitations and incompleteness” in Hesse and Sayyid’s phraseology. Even if one tried to make a case that her being raped for nearly a decade in a white Catholic boarding school in Rome was unrelated to her vulnerability due to her marginalized race, nationality, and class, it does not explain the incessant subjection to denigrating racist comments and treatment in Italy that adult Zuhra reports in her native land, nonetheless, where she arrived as a newborn and where she was raised and educated and holds regular citizenship, as the author herself. Zuhra is regularly the target of racially-motivated disparaging remarks and sexual violence due solely to her black skin, gender, and “non-Italian” physical traits, which recalls easily the Aryanism of the Nazis. As previously mentioned, even the nuns in a religious order and her elementary school teachers degraded her as a child, calling her and the other black children “Zulù,” “sporca negra” [“dirty nigger”], and “Kunta Kinte.” As yet another example provided in the narrative, even though Zuhra is degreed in Brazilian literature, she is always presumed to be the cleaning lady in the large commercial bookstore

in Rome where she works. The clients are unable to see her as a qualified information source and ask with irritation where the “real” store clerks are hiding:

C’è da dire che alla Libla (la libreria dove lavoro) mi scambiano sempre per la donna delle pulizie...Nessuno chiede informazioni alla donna delle pulizie. Mai...è quasi come se non esistesse la donna delle pulizie. L’equazione era nera uguale sguattera, mai nera uguale commessa...Cercavano il commesso. Ossia un uomo o una donna bianchi che li potesse assicurare...Mi circumnavigano anche...Poi, dopo aver perso ogni speranza di trovare pelle pallida in giro, attaccavano indignati: “Ma, insomma, dove sono finiti i commessi? È una vergogna!” (Scego *Oltre* 234-235, my insertion)

[It needs to be said that at the Libla (the bookstore where I work) they always take me for the cleaning lady...Nobody asks information from the cleaning lady. Never...It’s almost as if the cleaning lady doesn’t exist. The equation was: black equals scullery maid, never black equals store clerk....They were looking for the clerk. That is, a white man or woman who could reassure them...They circumnavigated me as well...Then, after having lost every hope of find pale skin around, they attacked indignantly: “But, humph, where have all the clerks gone? What a disgrace!]

In addition to being vulnerable to sexual violence and marginalized professionally based on “race,” Zuhra’s citizenship/right to belong is continually questioned even though she has only ever lived in Rome. For example, she recounts the traumatizing experience of being nearly arrested when she studies abroad in Valencia through the European Union-wide Erasmus program. Solely due to her color, she is detained for hours and aggressively interrogated at the police station upon entry to Spain. Since she is black, she is presumed by the authorities to be an *extracomunitaria* [“clandestine illegal immigrant”] and is accused of having falsified her Italian passport. Moreover, the Spanish police squalid, aggressive examination of her bely the persistent colonial archetype of the black female/prostitute:

In Spagna mi volevano arrestare...(L’addetto) Mi guarda, strabuzza tutta l’orbita. Poi comincia a palpare la mia carta d’identità, manco fosse il deretano di una porno star. Gira e rigira la povera carta come se dietro di me non ci fossero almeno settanta persone in fila. Poi si alza con scatto felino e dopo due minuti mi vengono a prelevare quattro energumeni stile campi di addestramento marines. Erano grossi, muscolosi e con l’aria di qualcuno che sta per spaccarti le ossa...Invece i tipi mi portano in una stanza, mi accecano con una lampada (stile B-movie) e mi interrogano...Mi ripetono ossessivamente dei temi chiave— *Eres clandestina. No eres italiana. Puta. Marica. Falsificadora de papales...* Da quel

giorno parto sempre foderata di documenti. Noi negri saraceni dobbiamo difenderci a ogni costo. (Scego *Babilonia* 39-40, author's insertion)

[In Spain, they wanted to arrest me... (The employee) looks at me, opening wide his whole orbit. Then he begins to palpate my identity card, it's not like it was the backside of a porn star. He turns over and over my identification card as if there weren't at least seventy people in line behind me. Then he gets up with a feline jerk and, after two minutes, four brutes who looked like they were straight out of a Marines training camp come to collect me. They were huge, muscular, and had the air of someone who was about to break your bones... Instead, the dudes take me to a room, they blind me with a lamp (B-movie style), and they interrogate me... They repeat to me obsessively key terms—*You're a clandestine/stowaway. You're not Italian. Whore. Pretty little pussy. Falsifier of documents*... From that day forward, I always depart (from Italy) covered with documents. We Saracen negroes have to defend ourselves at all costs.]

An earlier work by Scego, the short story “Salsicce” [“Sausages”] (2005), demonstrates the same notion of “liminal citizenship,”<sup>143</sup> of continually questioned identity of a black individual in Italy, as if “black Italian” were an oxymoron. The female protagonist of the short story, a Somali immigrant to Italy and a practicing Muslim, compels herself to buy, prepare, and ingest pork meat to prove her Italianness: “Se mi ingoio queste salsicce una per una, la gente lo capirà che sono italiana come loro? Identica a loro?” [“If I swallow these sausages, one by one, will people believe that I am Italian like them? Identical to them?”] (Scego “Salsicce” 26) While preparing the meat whose smell disgusts her, she recalls idiotic, insensitive questions to which she is constantly subjected that put her identity in doubt, even to herself. For instance, at a competition for a job, the interviewer asks her: “Ti senti più italiana o più somala?” [“Do you feel more Italian or more Somali?”] (Scego “Salsicce” 27) Not knowing how to respond in a coherent manner with her self-concept, yet wanting to win the position, she replies:

Forse  $\frac{3}{4}$  somala e  $\frac{1}{4}$  italiana? O forse è vero tutto il contrario? No so rispondere! Non mi sono mai “frazionata” prima d’ora... Naturalmente ho mentito. Non mi piace, ma ci sono

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<sup>143</sup> For an explanation on the origins of the term “liminal citizenship” and its meaning, see footnote #88 in the prior chapter. Very briefly, it originated with Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) to describe “liminal persons” or those who are “ambiguous...persons who slip through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions in cultural space.” (Turner 94-95) The term is now employed to describe individuals of ambiguous citizenship status, owing to their perceived non-belonging due to their race, origins, and/or linguistic abilities which has little to do with their legal political status.

stata costretta. L'ho guardata fissa negli occhi da rospo che si ritrovava e le ho detto "italiana"...Mi sarei sentita un'idiota anche se avessi detto somala. Non sono un cento per cento, non lo sono mai stata...Credo di essere una donna senza identità. O meglio con più identità. (Scego "Salsicce" 28, author's quotation marks)

[Perhaps three-fourths Somalian and one-fourth Italian? Or perhaps the opposite is true? I don't know how to respond! I've never "fractioned" myself before now...Naturally, I lied. I don't like, but I was forced. I stared at the woman in her toad eyes and I told her, "Italian."...I would have felt like an idiot even if I had said Somalian. I'm not a 100%, I never was...I think I'm a woman without an identity. Or, better yet, with more than one identity.]

The unnamed protagonist of "Salsicce" proceeds to list all the ways in which she feels Somalian (when she drinks tea with cardamom, saffron and cinnamon, when she recites the five daily prayers facing Mecca, when she attends weddings with men who stay on one side bored and the women who are on the other side, dancing, eating, and having fun, when she thinks of all her relatives without roots, refugees from Somalia who are dispersed all over the world). Then, she considers the moments in which she feels more Italian (when she can recite by heart *The Fifth of May*, a renown poem by Alessandro Manzoni, when she eats chocolate-chip gelato for 1.80 Euros, when she sings Italian songs in the shower, when she talks about sex, men, and depression with her Italian girlfriends). In the end, the narrator forces herself to swallow the sausages to prove to others, but mostly to herself, that she is authentically Italian in a country where "sono tutti dello stesso colore" ["everyone is the same color"]. (Scego "Salsicce" 33) She knows that to be black in Europe is to be automatically "sfigato" ["loser"]: "Sono nera e penso che essere neri sia una sfigata assoluta. Non c'è scampo, sei già condannato ad essere oggetto di occhiate di traverso—nella migliore delle ipotesi—o di pestaggi, roghi, lapidazioni, stupri, crocifissioni, omicidi—nella peggiore." ["I'm black and I think that being black is absolutely lame. There's no escape, you're already condemned to be the object of sideways glances—in the best of scenarios—or to beatings, burning at the stake, stoning, rape, crucifixion, homicide—in the worst."] (Scego "Salsicce" 33)



The short story concludes with the protagonist vomiting up the sausages, a metaphor for having “to swallow” all Italian culture, even those aspects that aren’t consonant with her own sense of self, yet she expels them, refusing to negate her identity and her Somalian heritage. However, she recognizes that if she had eaten them, she would still have the same *mestiza* identity, as she puts it, “lo stesso mix” [“the same mix.”] (Scego “Salsicce” 35) In an act of self-affirmation, she decides that if she annoys others because she is black or that she won’t eat pork or fill-in-the-blank with other non-Italian aspects of her identity, “. . .d’ora in poi me ne fotterò!” [“...from now on, I won’t give a fuck!”] (Scego “Salsicce” 35)

Akin to the list making that the protagonist of “Salsicce” performs, noting which aspects of herself feel more Somalian and what parts of her identity she considers Italian, feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldù in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999) outlines a strategy for negotiating a complex racial and national identity which describes as “taking inventory.” In other words, Anzaldù recommends deconstructing one’s *mestiza* identity: What did I inherit? From whom? From where? Writing from the standpoint of being female, lesbian, lower-socioeconomic class, and Mexican, Anzaldù proposes that inventory taking permits the borderland subject to construct and claim a new identity which relishes its ambiguity and demands subject-hood from the so-called “legitimate inhabitants” of a nation, as opposed to liminal citizens such as Scego’s protagonists Zuhra, Mar, and the unnamed figure in “Salsicce.” (Anzaldù 25, 104-105) Anzaldù claims that cultivating and embracing a *mestiza* sense of self is the first step in refuting an imposed marginalized identity by hegemonic groups and nations:

The work of the *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended...A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (Anzaldù 102)

In the previously cited literary example, the narrative voice in “Salsicce” inventories the complex nature of her identity which includes, without excluding, both Somalian and Italian elements. As Anzaldù warns, the “uprooting of dualistic thinking” will be difficult as evidenced by the protagonist who feels compelled to ingest meat which is contrary to her religion and who finds herself in crisis in a job interview, unable to respond to a question as to whether she feels “more Italian” or “more Somalian,” interrogatives that presuppose the essentialist categories of race and nation. Yet her solution seems to mirror that suggested by Anzaldù which is to “break down” the duality of subject-object and embrace one’s complexity which is echoed by the narrative voice’s declaration that “from now on, I won’t give a fuck!”

Vivian Gerrand argues that Italian postcolonial literature, speaking specifically of the literary works of Somalian-Italian writers Ubah Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego, have the objective of “complicat(ing) the prevalent notion” of what being Italian means via “destabilize(ing) the idea of a singular and culturally homogeneous Italian identity.” (Gerrand 270) Speaking from the British context, Paul Gilroy defines the notion of a specific culture and race as being unequivocally linked to the modern nation-state as “cultural nationalism” in his “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity” (1993). (Gilroy “Black” 2-3) What he describes as the “new, ethnically absolute and culturalist racism” was necessary to the co-construction of modernity with its truth of the integral nation-state. (Gilroy “Black” 10) Ethnic and cultural racism was fundamental to bolstering the validity of the State, that is, it had to adopt “a language of nationality and national belonging as well as the languages of ‘race’ and ethnic identity” in order to reify its “over-integrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of ‘black’ and ‘white’ people.” (Gilroy “Black” 2) Thus, dichotomously arranged, hierarchical discourses of race and nationality allowed

hegemonic powers to “construct the nation as an ethnically homogenous object” which permitted, and allows still today, the exploitation, exclusion, marginalization, and violence of racialized Others. (Gilroy “Black” 3) Therefore, the idea of a “pure,” “native” Italian identity (race and culture) is a fabricated myth. Gilroy observes that, in fact, European nationalities and racial differences were discursively constructed during the Enlightenment via pseudo-scientific discourses on race. This rhetoric was (is) employed to differentiate the insiders from the outsiders, the ones who belong to a nation and those who cannot, the ones who can dominate and those who must serve due to their innate natural differences. Gilroy rejects the constructions of both nation and national identity. Instead, he adopts the metaphor of a ship in motion to symbolize the “doubleness” and the “cultural intermixture” of the Black Briton. The ship, like the Black Briton/Italian/German/French, is a “living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” which represents the complexities and the fluidities of identities, thereby negating the myth of the modern nation-state as a “fully formed and mutually exclusive cultural community.” (Gilroy “Black” 4, 7) Moreover, Gilroy, as do Anzaldù, Gerrand, and Scego via her literary works,<sup>144</sup> calls for “creolization” and “syncretism” of identity and culture with a goal of “escap(ing) the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes even ‘race’ itself.” (Gilroy “Black” 15, 19) As in Scego’s short story, “Salsicce” in which the protagonist refuses to “fraction” herself by responding to a ludicrous question as to what percentage of her identity is Somalian and which portion is Italian, Gilroy invalidates the absolutism of national and cultural racism and calls for the construction of a “more pluralistic, post-colonial sense of British culture and national identity,” concepts which are readily transferable to the Italian (European, American) context.

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<sup>144</sup> For a reflection on the influence of Anzaldù’s work on Scego’s literary production, see Simone Brioni, “The Somali Italian Borderland in *Oltre Babilonia*” (2015), pp. 129-137.

(Gilroy “Black” 11) In this regard, Scego via the story of Zuhra *Oltre Babilonia* complicates the notion of what being Italian can mean. First, the author employs the denominative of “Negropolitana” to refer to the protagonist which could be translated as “Black metropolitan girl,” as the title of each chapter which is related by Zuhra. Zuhra’s self-naming, which includes the term “Negro,” posits an empowering inscription of Black femaleness which opposes its use as an axis of minoritization, a position of black feminism as expressed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” (1991). The nickname “Negropolitana” unites the seemingly incompatible parts of Zuhra’s identity, Negro/Black and Politana/Belonging to the City of Rome, the capital city of Italy. Zuhra’s identity as Negropolitana, a native-born Italian, yet Black and with Somalian parents, disrupts the fixed archetype of Italian as white, Catholic, and of a singular culture. In addition to her name, the linguistic virtuosity that Zuhra employs in her narration demonstrate irrefutably her Italianness, or more specifically, her Roman-ness. Her discourse is sprinkled amply with the Roman regional variety of Italian, “proving” via her language that she belongs to the city. Reminiscent of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s adoption of the Roman dialect in *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) as a neorealist representation of the protagonists’ lives in the *borgate* [“working-class neighborhoods in the periphery”] of Rome, Zuhra’s adroitness with *romanesco* leaves indubitable her origins. To cite just a few of numerous examples: “er pischelletto” [“the little guy/dude”], “mortacci,” [“your deceased relatives,” as an expletive], “er vizietto” [“the little vice”], “nun ce vedete” [“you can’t see”], “voi non ce potete sta” [“you can’t stay here”], “de ‘sto povero cristo” [“poor guy/Christ”], “io che nun so’ tanto bona” [“I’m not so good/virtuous”], “mo” [“now”]. However, Zuhra is also adept at refined, university-level Italian and literary references with nonchalance which she uses

as a weapon to defend herself and to exert her identity as a *bona fide* Italian citizen since not even her passport is sufficient:

Forse, penso, Manzoni parlava così. Sono perfetta. Mi esce fuori un italiano gentile, colto, irrealista. Quello che uso agli uffici pubblici o quando devo pagare il ticket sanitario. Mi guardano con le facce a pagnotta e mi sbraitano “Permesso di soggiorno,” come fosse una formula magica per farmi vergognare. Mi chiedo perché debba essere una vergogna essere straniero. Le facce a pagnotta ci rimangono male, quando gli spiaccio sul naso la mia carta d’identità italiana, la mia cittadinanza italiana. Non ci credono. (Scego *Oltre* 283)

[Perhaps, I think, Manzoni (a famous nineteenth-century Italian author) spoke that way. I’m perfect. A gentle, educated, unreal Italian comes out of me. The one that I use at public offices or when I have to pay the health-care co-pay. They look at me with their doughy faces and they scream at me, “Residency permit,” as if it were a magical formula to shame me. I ask myself why it should be an embarrassment to be a foreigner. The dough faces take it badly when I mash in their face my Italian identity card, my Italian citizenship. They don’t believe it.]

Yet, Negropolitana makes clear that Zuhra’s identity is not exclusively or simply Italian, further disrupting the “cultural nationalism” myth of a single, simple culture and language which incontrovertibly represents nationality. In addition to her adept employment of *romanesco*, cultivated Italian, as well as colorful youthful jargon Italian punctuated by curse words, Zuhra’s discourses frequently include Somalian terms as well, sometimes translated, sometimes not. In fact, in the Epilogue to *Oltre Babilonia*, she highlights the importance of her two native languages which are like two mothers for her, yet which are related to different aspects of her identity. Regarding Somali: “Mamma mi parla nella nostra lingua madre...In somalo ho trovato il conforto del suo utero, in somalo ho sentito le uniche ninnananne che mi ha cantato, in somalo di certo ho fatto i primi sogni.” [“Mom talks to me in our mother tongue...In Somali, I found the comfort of her uterus. In Somali, I heard the only lullabies that she sang to me. In Somali, I certainly had my first dreams.”] (Scego *Oltre* 443) Thus, Somali is the language that creates intimacy with her mother and which is tied to her infancy. Zuhra dubs Italian “l’altra madre” [“the other mother”] and lists the canonic Italian authors and poets via whose literature she has studied in school and

university and represents the language with which she writes: “Non saprei scegliere nessun'altra lingua per scrivere, per tirare fuori l'anima.” [“I wouldn't know how to choose any other language to write in, to pull out my soul.”] (Scego *Oltre* 444) Therefore, Italian is the vehicle with which she communicates with the community where she lives, yet she calls it *l'altra madre* which underlines her conflictual relationship with Italian/culture-politics which still makes her feel like a foreigner.<sup>145</sup>

The protagonist of *Oltre Babilonia*, being black, Muslim, multilingual, with Somalian parents, yet fully Italian, serves as an *exemplum* of thousands of other individuals like her in the Belpaese (or in Europe or the United States) whose very personhood disrupts the prevalent myth of “cultural nationalism” in Italy. She admonishes the doughy faces who frame her immediately as a foreigner given that she is black, chastising them in *romanesco* and the jargon of Italian youth: “Renditi conto...che volente o nolente, la città eterna te sta a cambia' intorno. Che ci siamo pure noi. Io ce sto da più de 'na ventina d'anni, mica bruscolini. E c'è gente anche più vecchia di me. Il tuo panico è tardivo...te dovevi caga' in mano trent'anni fa, mo' è tardi.” [“You'd better wake up...that whether you like it or not, the Eternal City (Rome) is changing around you. That also we are here (black Italians). I'm been here for more than twenty years, hardly small change. And there are people here older than me. Your panic is a little late...you should have shit on yourself thirty years ago, now, it's too late.”] (Scego *Babilonia* 235) Zuhra is correct: Italy is hardly a homogeneous nation notwithstanding the radicated national imaginary of such. According to the January 1, 2018 report of the Istituto Nazionale della Statistica (I'Istat), comparable to the United States Census Bureau, of 60,494,000 residents in Italy, 5,065,000 are “foreigners,” or 8.4% of the population, yet these numbers are probably underestimated due to the significant number of

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<sup>145</sup> For a reflection on language, culture, and complex *mestiza* identity construction in *Oltre Babilonia*, see Simone Brioni's “The Somali Italian Borderland in *Oltre Babilonia*” (2015), particularly pp. 132-134.

undocumented individuals. Residents hailing from other nations are unequally distributed throughout the peninsula, with fully 57.8% residing in the North where there are more employment opportunities.<sup>146</sup> Contrary to the alarmist, racist and nationalist dogma promulgated by extreme-right political groups, such as the Lega, the greatest number of “foreigners” in Italy come from other European Union countries, 30.5%, not from Africa; another 21.0% arrive from central or eastern European nations, while only 12.9% immigrate from northern Africa.<sup>147</sup> A study on Italian elementary and middle schools in 2013 found that immigrant children constitute 9.8% of the population and up to 56% of the total in some schools in the north.<sup>148</sup> Even with the significant presence of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in the population, xenophobia of perceived foreigners, especially black ones, is a prevalent attitude among many Italians and is even directed toward children as Zuhra, the protagonist of *Oltre Babilonia*, attests in her narrative. Some parents elect to enroll their children in private Catholic schools because they are outraged that there are immigrant children with the rationalization that high percentage of foreign children detract from the “native” child’s educational experience. The barely-masked racism is justified via the objection that foreign children are not native speakers of Italian and, thus, slow down instruction for the autochthonous pupils, an apprehension which is not born out by pedagogical research.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> [www.istat.it/it/files//2017/12/C03.pdf](http://www.istat.it/it/files//2017/12/C03.pdf)

<sup>147</sup> [www.istat.it/it/files//2017/12/C03.pdf](http://www.istat.it/it/files//2017/12/C03.pdf)

<sup>148</sup> [www.istruzione.it/allegati/Notiziario\\_Stranieri\\_12\\_13.pdf](http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/Notiziario_Stranieri_12_13.pdf)

<sup>149</sup> In her autobiographical work, *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010), Scego reports that she was seen as an anomaly at her school in Rome in the 1980s even though it was her birthplace and that, in fact, some parents complained vehemently about her presence. She observes that the same xenophobia against black and/or immigrant children, even second generation children, persists even today: “Oggi alcune mamme si lamentano della presenza di bambini di origine straniera nelle scuole. Non vogliono far sedere i loro figli nella stessa classe. Non vogliono contaminare la loro prole. Ma se qualcuno le chiama razziste, loro negano, ‘Non è razzismo. È solo che questi bambini limitano la produttività della scuola. Noi vogliamo il meglio per i nostri figli, non vogliamo farli diventare zulù.’ Il meglio per loro è inteso come bianco, naturalmente.” [“Even today some mothers complain about the presence of children with foreign origins in the schools. They don’t want their children placed in the same class. They don’t want to

Nonetheless, even if this supposition or “concern” were true, that is, that non-native speakers of Italian impede instruction of all schoolchildren, ironically, the Italian government does little to aid the linguistic integration and academic achievement of foreign-born children. For example, Italian as a Second Language instruction is not financially supported by the State and is not a guaranteed right available in all schools.

Another example of the conspicuous xenophobia of immigrants in Italy, particularly those *di colore* [“of color”] as they are euphemistically referred to in Italian, is the always more popular extreme right nationalistic and racist political party, the Lega. Also known as the Lega Nord [“the Northern Alliance”] since they were formed and are particularly strong in the North of Italy, the party recently garnered a large number of parliament seats in the most recent elections in Italy on March 4, 2018, obtaining 58 out of 137 seats in the Senate and 124 out of 316 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the highest percentage of the vote second only to the counter-establishment party, Cinquestelle [“Five Stars”]. On the Lega’s homepage, the first slogan that the visitor encounters is isolationist and alarmist: “Allarme sbarchi, 1.400 in 48 ore: Subito un governo che controlla i confini ed espella i clandestini” [“Disembarkment (immigrants who arrive in Italy by boat) Alarm,

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contaminate their offspring. But if someone calls them racist, they deny it. ‘It’s not racism. It’s only that these children (the ones with foreign origins) limit the productivity of the school. We want the best for our children, we don’t want them become Zulus.’ The best for them is understood as white, naturally.”] (Scego *Casa* 152) The author continues with her own experience of racist taunting and even violence that she suffered at school, echoing a lot of the terms that she includes in *Oltre Babilonia*; she was called Kunta Kinte, zulù, “sporca negra” [“dirty nigger”], was accused of having fleas and transmitting African diseases. None of the other children would befriend her and some even hit her and threw rocks at her which caused her to suffer both academically and psychologically. This continued for years until an elementary school teacher intervened and inquired in front of the other children about Somalian culture and folktales. Once Igiaba began sharing fascinating aspects of her parents’ homeland with the other children, she became a sort of superstar in the class. She credits the teacher for having literally saved her life. (Scego *Casa* 152, 157) Moreover, educational research does not support the fear that foreign children detract from the “productivity” of the school. Tullio De Mauro, renown scholar of the Italian language and former professor at one of the most prestigious universities in Italy, La Sapienza in Rome, asserts that multiple pedagogical studies have established that all children, both foreign-born and native-born Italians, learn more when the classroom is heterogeneous. In a 2008 interview, De Mauro noted that this research considers heterogeneity both in terms of ethnicity and disability. Moreover, he observed that children actually learn less when the classroom is composed of only native, able-bodied children. [sergiobontempelli.wordpress.com/2008/10/19/demauro/](http://sergiobontempelli.wordpress.com/2008/10/19/demauro/)



1400 in 48 hours: Immediately, a government who monitors the borders and expels illegal immigrants”].<sup>150</sup> A quick perusal of the party’s homepage equates immigrant (black ones) with: rapist, terrorist, criminal, delinquent. For example, one party leader links African by metonymy to dangerous criminal and/or terrorist: “Tutta l’Africa in Italia non ci sta! Abbiamo il dovere di garantire sicurezza per tutti gli italiani!” [“It’s not okay for all of Africa to be in Italy! We have the obligation to guarantee the safety of all Italians!”] The Lega frames immigration with “invasion,” thus, their political platform includes isolationist, separatist, and nationalist ideologies that aim at protecting Italy from “contamination” from outsiders, a discourse from fascism. In fact, they have been one of the most vehement and successful opponents of *ius soli*, the “right of the soil” law, which would confer citizenship to those born, raised, and educated on Italian soil, which is still not ratified in Italy. Consistent with Gilroy’s identification of the co-construction of nation and race, Andall and Duncan note that blacks in Italy are still held as “space invaders” (Andall and Duncan 3): black bodies don’t belong since they cannot possibly be Italian, at best, they represent a contamination. Thus, black foreign bodies do not have the right to citizenship or even necessarily to life if one considers the Lega’s policy that all boats with political, war, and economic refugees should be turned away, regardless of the risk to the individuals aboard, and all undocumented immigrants to Italy should be immediately repatriated regardless of the political or economic consequences to them. Andall and Duncan observe that the prevalent racist culture and politics in Italy have its roots in colonial expansion, especially during the fascist regime. Italian colonialism was an attempt the better the second-class image of Italy in Europe where it was (and still is) viewed as economically weak and a working-class nation of emigration. To distinguish the Italian colonizer from the colonized, fascists had to invent dichotomous, race and nation-based

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<sup>150</sup> [www.leganord.org](http://www.leganord.org)

hierarchies. In his 1927 Ascension Day speech, Benito Mussolini compared himself to a surgeon who would “excise the nation’s infected parts” via his political platform of “public hygiene.” (cited in Andall and Duncan 8-9) With the objective of maintaining racial purity, cultural and racial nationalism in Gilroy’s terms, *madamato* legislation was ratified during Italy’s colonial expansion in Eritrea, criminalizing sexual relations between white Italian men and black indigenous women. (Andall and Duncan 5) As part of a public propaganda campaign, the magazine *La difesa della razza* [“The defense of the (Italian) race”]<sup>151</sup> was first published in 1938, employing a pseudo-scientific look and language, to prevent the “degeneration” of the Italian race via laws and government policies to “manage sexuality for the health of the state.” The magazine’s mission statement called for the “need for vigilance in view of the threat posed to the Italian race by its unfortunate proximity to Jews and to Africans in the colonies,” very similar to rhetoric adopted by the extreme-right today. (Andall and Duncan 9) In the first issue, *ibridismo* [“hybridism”] was defined as mixing Italian blood with African blood with the warning that such “unfortunate” breeding would lead to “contamination” of the Italian race. However, an *incrocio* [“crossing”] between different European “races” would lead to favorable outcomes in the progeny according to the magazine. On the front cover of the first issue, the disastrous results of *ibridismo* were displayed: the *meticciato* [“mixed breed”] monster with the cacophonous Tower of Babel in the background. (Andall and Duncan 9) The same ideology and verbiage is by the political right in Italy today; the Lega promotes the same ideal of a white, pure, Italian race and views foreigners/immigrants as “invaders” of Italy and as the source of a “dilution” of Italian language and culture due to their “contaminating” influences, particularly those who hail from any African country. As Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), bodies that are Black, African, and

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<sup>151</sup> See the lengthy footnote #50 for an explanation of the content, images, and ideologies of the fascist magazine *La difesa della razza*.

Muslim are “outside the domain of intelligibility,” therefore, they represent a threat to white, Catholic, patriarchal, “pure” Italian culture, a politically-correct euphemism for race; individuals like the Somalian refugee family of Zuhra in *Oltre Babilonia*, the protagonists of Scego’s short stories “Salsicce” and “Dismatria,” as well as the author herself represent the “constitutive outside” as theorized by Judith Butler: they are excluded from full membership in Italian society, even if they are citizens. (Butler 34-35, 38-39)

Moreover, the well-entrenched cultural and racial nationalism is not limited to the collective imaginary or extreme-right political parties, it is written into Italian law. Italian citizenship laws are inherently racist, being based on *ius sanguinis*, blood ties, instead of *ius soli*, birthplace. Therefore, citizenship is denied to bodies that are not linked to “Italian bloodlines,” even if a child is born, raised, and educated on Italian soil. (Gerrand 274) G2 individuals, “Second Generation” or those born in Italy to immigrant parents such as Scego and her protagonists in the previously mentioned literary works, must apply every year up until age eighteen for a *permesso di soggiorno* [“residency permit”] for “study purposes.” Once a G2 individual reaches the age of majority, they have only one year to apply for citizenship which is in no way guaranteed: s/he has to prove that s/he has never left Italian soil for a significant length of time, which marginalizes school children from going on *gite scolastiche* [“school field trips”] in Europe with their class, a custom in Italian schools; due to their travel restriction, G2 children are marked as different from the other children, are deprived of formative educational experiences, and are negated the possibility to form close bonds with their classmates. In addition, a G2 person’s citizenship approval depends on his/her parents’ immigration status. Thus, an individual born on Italian soil, who has never lived in another country, and who is Italian culturally and linguistically is conferred precarious legal status with clear social, educational, and employment consequences: for instance,

without regular citizenship, a G2 individual can work only as a *precario* [“short term, fixed contract worker”] which makes it practically impossible to establish a family, a household, or any sort of permanent existence as an Italian citizens. (Andall 184-185) For this reason, a socially and politically active Internet-based support group, the G2 Network was established in 2005 in Rome.<sup>152</sup> They prioritize two issues: obtaining citizenship rights based on *ius soli* and aiming to reconfigure Italian identity as multicultural and multiethnic in opposition to the pejorative term, “hybrid,” which implies mixture/contamination of a previously pure race. (Andall 175, 177) In her essay, Andall notes with irony that Italian citizenship isn’t granted to children of immigrants who are born, raised, and educated in Italy, yet is automatically conferred to “Italians Abroad,” those who have Italian relatives but don’t speak Italian and perhaps have never even been to Italy. (Andall 188)

Hesse and Sayyid in their “Narrating the Postcolonial Political and the Immigrant Imaginary” (2008) argue that the immigrant is “ethnically marked,” constituted from the outside as one who is “ontologically distinct...exotica...to be dismissed...left out of national belongings.” (Hesse and Sayyid 21-22) They hold that racially-marked G2 individuals, even those like Zuhra with an Italian passport or Scego’s protagonist in *Salsicce*,” the “racialized ex-colonial ‘immigrant’...stands betwixt and between citizen and foreigner, a colonial past and a national present, West and ‘non-West,’ one of us or one of them.” (Hesse and Sayyid 30) In “Racialized Modernity: An Analytics of White Mythologies” (2007), Barnor Hesse unequivocally deconstructs race with the thesis: “Modernity is racial,” meaning that the construction of the modern nation-state is dependent on racial binaries. Barnor Hesse exposes the “white mythology” in which the white man invents himself as the “universal form;” he utilizes himself as a standard, as the norm

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<sup>152</sup> [//www.secondegenerazioni.it/](http://www.secondegenerazioni.it/)

which is necessarily associated with “Whiteness, Christian, the West, Europeanness.” (Hesse 643) Hesse argues that Europe had to fabricate itself and European-ness as colonial signifiers in order to simultaneously construct “materially, discursively, and extra-corporeally” non-European-ness so that some human bodies could be “territorialized.” (Hesse 646) In other words, the modern European nation-state had to give birth to itself as a “universal frame of reference founded on distancing and separation” so that it could “conquer, repress (and) estrange” the Other. (Hesse 648) Italian postcolonial writers, such as Igiaba Scego, trouble the notion of Italian-ness as necessarily constituted by a pure race, culture, and language. The complex characters in their literary works, which in fact represent the reality of modern Italy, can create space for “alternative concepts of identity that incorporate multiple affiliations.” (Gerrand 276) In her autobiographical work, *La mia casa è dove sono* [“My Home is Where I Am”] (2010), Scego observes that Italy has been a meeting point for diverse peoples for millennia and that cultural, linguistic, national heterogeneity is not a new phenomenon/social problem with the advent of the “invasion” of immigrants from “Africa,” as the alarmist rhetoric of the political right suggests:

...l’Italia è Babele. Qui ci sono passati tutti, arabi, normanni, francesi, austriaci. C’è passato Annibale, condottiero africano con i suoi elefanti. “Ecco perché molti italiani hanno la pelle scura” cantavano gli Almamegretta “ecco perché molti italiani hanno i capelli scuri. Un po’ del sangue di Annibale è rimasto a tutti quanti nelle vene.” Essere italiani a ben vedere significa far parte di una frittura mista. Una frittura fatta di mescolanze e contaminazioni. (Scego *Casa* 159)

[...Italy is a Babel. Everyone has passed through here, Arabs, Normans, French, Austrians. Hannibal (the Carthaginian general 247-182 BCE), African warlord with his elephants. “Ah, that’s why many Italians have dark skin” sang Almamegretta (Neapolitan musical group) “Ah, that’s why many Italians have dark hair. A little bit of Hannibal’s blood remained in everyone’s veins.” When you think about it, being Italian means being part of a mixed-fry. A fry made of mixtures and contaminations.]

Yet, as Igiaba Scego’s and other Italian postcolonial authors’ literary works testify, it is undeniable that the collective imaginary of the black, foreign “space invader” with its roots in

Italian colonialism persists and is deeply radicated. Moreover, “cultural and racial nationalism,” to use Gilroy’s term, or “racial modernity,” in Hesse’s model, continues to impact the daily lived experiences of individuals with complex origins and identities, resulting in difficult and at times even violent subjection to racism which leads to problematic identity construction and/or psycho-affective disorders for the otherized individual. As the protagonist of *Oltre Babilonia* comments: “Tiro fuori il mio passaporto bordò. Lo guardo. Zuhra Laamane...Io me medesima, in persona, carne e ossa, tette, figa e tutto. Io, italiana. Io, italiana? Il dubito che mi assale.” [“I pull out my bordeaux passport. I look at it. Zuhra Laamane...Me myself, in person, in the flesh and blood, boobs, pussy, and everything. Me, Italian. Me, Italian? Doubt assails me.”] (Scego *Oltre* 39) No matter how Roman/Italian Zuhra is linguistically, culturally, and with respect to her citizenship-status, she will never be perceived as such which destabilizes her own sense of self. As Igiaba Scego observed in a 2015 article, “Siamo ancora pecore nere” [“We are still black sheep”], that she wrote for *Internazionale*: being black in Italy implies “l’ergastolo, paghi per tutta la vita” [“a life sentence, you pay for the rest of your life”]. (Scego “Siamo ancora” 1)

### **III. REFERENTS FOR IDENTITY FORMATION: CONSTRUCTION OF THE LIFE NARRATIVE AND THE BLACK SOMALIAN MOTHER**

For Zuhra, narration of self and family history plays a fundamental role in constructing an affirmative, coherent self-identity as an Italian Black woman with Somalian origins, and is also essential in her healing from being raped as a child. In *Oltre Babilonia*, self-narrative is found in a multitude of forms: the main protagonist’s construction of a “life story” which she denominates a “romanzo [“novel”], as well as her mother’s and father’s autobiographies which take the form of

Maryam's voice recordings on audiocassettes and a letter in Elias' case.<sup>153</sup> Even though there are five narrative voices in the novel, Zuhra's story is privileged, as previously mentioned: she is the only protagonist of the five who speaks in the first person, rendering *Oltre Babilonia* "her story;" the only exception is when her parents write/speak, but their discourse is directed toward her and is to inform and edify her. In addition, Zuhra's narration opens and closes the novel, comprising the Prologue and the Epilogue, forming a frame to unify the novel. As the central protagonist, on the very first pages of the Prologue, Zuhra presents the principal problem to be resolved in the text, her long-term depression which she perceives as "losing her colors:"

...(le immagini di un poeta spagnolo che era depresso in esilio e la guerra civile interminabile in Somalia) mi ricordavano troppo l'esilio di me da me...Arginai le lacrime...Piansi tanto...soffocai le urla e mi accorsi...che non avevo più i colori...Ho camminato così nella mia vita, quasi senza accorgermene...La cosa è andata avanti per un decennio o poco più. (Scego *Oltre* 8-9, my insertions)

[...(the images of a depressed Spanish poet in exile and the interminable civil war in Somalia) they reminded me too much of my exile from myself...I held back my tears...I cried so much...I suffocated my screams and I noticed...that I didn't have my colors anymore...I carried on like that in my life, almost without being aware of it...The thing went on for a decade or a little more.]

In the same Prologue, Zuhra identifies the etiology of her depression: "Era stato quello zio a darmi lezioni non richieste di sesso...Fu così che cominciarono cinque anni tosti. Mi lavavo le cosce con il sapone ogni giorno, meticolosamente. E quel sapore acre? Non si toglieva dalla bocca neppure con mille dentifrici. Avevo otto anni la prima volta." ["It was that uncle who gave me unsolicited sex lessons...Five tough years began like that. I washed my thighs with soap every morning, meticulously. And that bitter taste? You couldn't get it out of your mouth even with a thousand

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<sup>153</sup> There is a parallel story in *Oltre Babilonia* of another daughter and her parent who recount their life stories to overcome traumatic episodes as well as to forge tenuous or inexistent familial bonds, that of Mar and her mother, Miranda. This study focuses mostly on Zuhra's story. Yet, many of the same themes are present: violence on the body, abortion in Mar's case; racial and national marginalization of the Black Other in the Italian context; sexual aggression directed toward the Black female body; the strained or inexistent rapport between daughter and mother.

kinds of toothpaste. I was eight years old the first time.”] (Scego *Oltre* 10) Zuhra continues, almost as if she is furnishing a medical case history of the trauma that she endured, identifying the problem, its origins, and then presenting its deleterious repercussions on the next two decades of her life. Her particular “case” of Post Rape Traumatic Syndrome implies a visceral phobia of men, yet she desires a beneficent, normal, intimate relationship with one: “...è l’amore che non ho mai conosciuto. Ecco è questo il problema mio...Voglio odori buoni, parole dolci, sguardi complici, stupori. Eh sì, magari con la barba.” [“...it’s love that I’ve never known. That is my problem...I want good odors, sweet words, knowing glances, wonder. And yes, perhaps with a beard.”] (Scego *Oltre* 10-11) As part of the syndrome related to being sexually violated as a child, Zuhra lists also her eating disorder: “...sono stata bulimica...(poi) ho cominciato a mangiare in modo disordinato o peggio, a dimenticarmi di mangiare” [“...I was bulimic...(then) I began to eat in a disordered way or, worse, I forgot to eat”] (Scego *Oltre* 18-19, my insertion), as well as other manifestations of the violence she endured as previously outlined: panic attacks, avoidance of her body and its sexual nature, camouflaging her form and shaving her head to avoid unwelcome advances, loathing her menstruations, not having seen or touched in her vagina in years, or ever had consensual sexual intercourse.

As part of her tried and failed resolutions to overcome depression and fulfill her desire to develop her identity as a sexually mature woman, Zuhra outlines her previous methodologies: she establishes friendships with gay men and/or chooses to have relationships with “muri” [“walls”], silent, closed men who require neither physical nor psychological intimacy from her. Yet neither of these solutions have proven satisfying. Thus, in the Prologue, Zuhra presents the pathway that will lead to healing from the trauma of being raped as a child and its sequelae: she references psychotherapy sessions with a “dottor Ross,” her psychologist, but mostly she speaks of recording



her trauma story which she frames as a novel:<sup>154</sup> “Mi sono detta che, mentre aspettavo il mio pellegrino rosso (l’uomo della sua vita che doveva essere nera come lei), potevo magari scrivere un romanzo...E il mio romanzo lo voglio scrivere solo su quaderni rossi...mi avrebbe aiutato a tirare fuori il femminile che è in me.” [“I told myself that, while I was waiting for my red foreigner (the man of her life who had to be Black like her), perhaps I could write a novel...And my novel, I only want to write it on red notebooks...it would help me to pull out the feminine that is in me.”] (Scego *Oltre* 14-15, my insertion) Zuhra’s multiple repetitions of the color “rosso” [“red”] in the Prologue as well as throughout *Oltre Babilonia* is noteworthy: in the introductory chapter alone, she specifies “rosso” when describing the type of man she is searching for, in her choice of hue for the journals in which she will record her story which will be her healing instrument, as well as in the name of her motherly therapist, doctor “Ross(o).” Rosso is also the color that she cannot perceive when her menstruations arrive, as well as the principal shade that is missing in her “loss of colors,” her metaphor for her depression. For Zuhra, “rosso” seems to imply by metonymy “amore” [“love”]: “...il mio rosso era diverso. Ricopriva per intero la chioma di un uomo dalle scarpacce marroni...Me stessa specchiata in un uomo...E se fosse così l’amore a Roma? Una sfumatura di rosso?” [...my red was different. It covered entirely the mane of a man with ugly brown shoes...Myself reflected in a man...And what if love was like that in Rome? A shade of

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<sup>154</sup> The mixing of genres here, the protagonist describing her recording of her rape trauma and subsequent life experiences as a “novel,” brings to mind Carla Macoggi’s two narrative works discussed in the first chapter of this study: Macoggi, while acknowledging in several interviews that her stories were autobiographical, altered the name of the protagonist to Fiorella and frames them as fictional, at least in part, describing them as “racconto autobiografico” [“autobiographical story”]. Macoggi had explained that this was a technique to allow her to distance herself from the trauma of losing her mother and close that chapter of her life, as well as offer her story not as an anomaly but as a model of many children who are separated from their parents by war, race and nationality-based immigration practices, and transnational adoptions. This is not to say that the rape narrative in *Oltre Babilonia* is autobiographical in the case of Scego, but it is for her protagonist Zuhra: perhaps she contextualizes her life story as a “novel” as a defense mechanism, as a sort of projection, projecting her traumatic childhood experience onto the protagonist of a “novel,” as did Macoggi. Framing her life narrative as fiction allows Zuhra to detach herself from it and to move on from the trauma of years of being raped as a child.

red?"] (Scego *Oltre* 12) Thus, in the Prologue, the protagonist presents her story as a history of a rape trauma case, like a psychiatrist-narrator, with the multitude of psychological and physical sequelae which have caused her to negate her sexuality and deprived her of love. Yet, the very act of recording her story will furnish the resolution to her depression and her incomplete identity as a woman, a healing which will be defined as allowing her to go "oltre Babilonia...in un posto dove la mia vagina è felice e innamorata." ["beyond Babylon...in a place where my vagina is happy and in love."] (Scego *Oltre* 449) In an interview a year subsequent to the publication of *Oltre Babilonia*, author Igiaba Scego confirms that the genesis for the novel was to explore the idea of: "...cosa succede al corpo delle donne quando una violenza attraversa il loro corpo?" ["...what happens to women's body when they experience violence?"] However, the author clarifies that she wanted to focus not on the horrors of the trauma itself, but on what occurs post-violence, on a woman's implacable will to heal from it and the method(s) she employs: "...che cosa rimane dei corpi? È possibile pensare, dopo traumi così terribili, a un domani? Ebbene, io vedo che il futuro che lo cercano, non si arrendono...C'è molta rabbia in loro, ma anche l'orgoglio di uscire." ["...what remains of the body? Is it possible to think about, after traumas so terrible, a tomorrow? And yet, I see that they are looking for the future, they don't give up...There is a lot of anger in them, but also the pride to come out of it."] (Scego *Nigrizia* 1)

At the urging of her psychotherapist, dottor Ross, Domenica writes a "novel" in "quaderni rossi" ["red notebooks"] which comprise her rape story and is fundamental in her healing from it.<sup>155</sup> "Expressive writing" is a paradigm that has been recognized in psychology since the mid-

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<sup>155</sup> A 2013 clinical trial at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, "Prolonged Exposure vs. Supportive Counseling for Sexual-Abuse Related PTSD in Adolescent Girls," demonstrated the efficacy of telling one's rape trauma story in the healing from rape-related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, even in comparison to traditional post-rape counseling. Sixty-one adolescent girls (ages 13 to 18) who self-presented at a Philadelphia-based rape crisis center and were diagnosed with post-rape PTSD were randomly assigned to two groups. Half underwent "prolonged exposure therapy" with the guidance/company of a counselor: the girls narrated their rape

eighties as an efficacious therapy for trauma victims.<sup>156</sup> Pennebaker and Chung's "Expressive Writing: Connections to Physical and Mental Health" (2011) reviewed twenty years of literature on the technique and reported that the "overwhelming majority" of participants believed that "the writing experience was valuable and meaningful." (Pennebaker and Chung 419) The research demonstrated that most clients wrote about "lost loves, deaths, sexual and physical abuse incidents, and tragic failures" and that the benefits of writing about them were both physical and psychological, including: improvement of mood, significant reduction of distress about the trauma, lowered number of medical visits, improved academic performance, and increased life satisfaction. (Pennebaker and Chung 417-421) In an attempt to understand the mechanism behind the efficacy of the expressive writing paradigm, the psychologists put forth several hypotheses, one of which is the benefit of disclosure. Via revealing an upsetting experience to someone else, the survivor perceives a greater sense of social support, thus, the individual's "cognitive load of inhibiting thoughts about the self" is diminished and less psychic energy is devoted to the traumatic incident.

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story for two to five sessions, recounting the traumatic memory, as well as returning to the actual site of the original trauma. The control group received up to fourteen weeks of 60-90 minutes supportive therapy sessions with experienced counselors. The study demonstrated that the storytelling of the rape experience along with the "exposure" to the place where they were raped was an efficacious treatment for post-rape PTSD, even when compared to counselor-delivered therapy at a community mental health clinic. 83.3% of the girls in the treatment group (narrating story, return to site of trauma) lost their PTSD diagnosis compared to 54.0% of the control group (counseling). Moreover, more girls in the treatment group reported improvement in depressive symptoms compared to the control group (11.4/30 compared to 4.9/30). The study is important because prior, evidence-based studies on effective treatments for PTSD in adolescents had not been conducted previously. (Foa, McLean *et al.* pp. 2650-2657)

<sup>156</sup>In a standard expressive writing protocol, patients are assigned to write about a traumatic experience for one to five days in a row, 15 minutes to 30 minutes per day, in a laboratory setting and no feedback is provided. A typical writing prompt is: "For the next three days, I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie this trauma to your childhood, your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives. You may also link this event to your past, your present, or your future, or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or to who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or on different topics each day. Not everyone has had a single trauma but all of us have had major conflicts or stressors—and you can write about these as well. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. The only rule is that once you begin writing, continue to do so until your time is up." (Pennebaker and Chung 418-419)

A second hypothesis for the value of expressive writing was “habituation,” that is, through writing about trauma, an individual can become accustomed to the strong, negative emotions associated with the experience, thus reducing its impact, however, the psychologists viewed the habituation model as a less satisfactory model for explaining the benefits of trauma writing. Instead, Pennebaker and Chung privilege their explanation that the expressive writing paradigm alleviates many consequences of a traumatic event by translating emotion to language, what they call an “analog to digital” conversion: writing down the details of what occurred aids in passing from an emotional-processing of a trauma, which produces continual distress and rumination about it and exacerbates its affective toll, to a cognitive-processing of it. They argue that via transforming strong, negative emotions into language/writing, the individual can “assign meaning, coherence, and structure” to a traumatic or distressing event, which allows him/her to understand it and “assimilate” it as part of their experience, or eventually forget about it. In other words, they propose that “once an event is adequately represented in language format, the verbal/conceptual (as opposed to emotional) processing takes over” which results in resolution of the trauma’s deleterious effects on the psyche and on one’s physical health. (Pennebaker and Chung 426-433, my insertion) Psychologists Medved and Brockmeier confirm the benefits, particularly the psychic ones, of constructing a coherent story about a difficult experience in their “Weird Stories: Brain, Mind, and Self” (2010). They argue that the production of a well-structured story about a traumatic experience is not only curative but can be considered the “outcome of recovery” itself; in other words, the ability to relate a coherent narrative about a traumatic event demonstrates achievement of the therapeutic goal, that one has cognitively processed the offense and been healed from it.<sup>157</sup> (Medved and Brockmeier 19) In fact, at the conclusion of the Prologue of *Oltre Babilonia*, the

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<sup>157</sup> To support this assertion, Medved and Brockmeier depart from the research of L. Davidson and J. Strauss. “Sense of Self in Recovery from Mental Illness.” *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, vol. 65, 1992, pp. 131-145.

protagonist recognizes the efficacy in recording her trauma story, which is the same method adopted by her parents and two other protagonists in the novel who overcome difficult experiences ranging from: rape, abortion, abusive romantic relationships, surviving a government coup and a suffered migration, the assassination of family members by torture, and incessant racial marginalization in one's homeland. As Zuhra succinctly explains: "...raccontandola (la tristezza). Attraverso le storie se ne esce." ["...telling it (sadness/sad stories). Through stories, we come out of it."] (Scego *Oltre* 24)

*Oltre Babilonia* has a successful therapeutic outcome or, in literary terms, a "happy ending," or at least a hopeful one: the protagonist, after having relayed her story via recording it in her red notebooks, seems to have overcome the depression and other sequelae caused by being raped as a child. At the very end of the novel, Zuhra recounts a meaningful dream to her mother:

Mamma, dovevi vedere che brutti tubacci avevo dentro la pancia. Erano di ferro, tutti parecchio arrugginiti. Li ho toccati per un attimo...Ho avuto paura a sfiorarli, sai? È la paura ad avermi fatto capire cos'era successo. Non ho partorito. Ho solo espulso...Non devo nascondere nulla. Dopo, da sveglia ho toccata la mia pancia, ho sfiorato anche la mia vagina. Mi sono sentita così leggera! Sono andata oltre Babilonia...(Scego *Oltre* 449)

[Mamma, you should have seen those ugly tubes that I had inside my belly. They were made of iron, all of them really rusty. I touched them for a second...It made me scared to touch them, you know? It was the fear that made me understand, what had happened. I hadn't given birth. I only expelled (them)...I don't have to hide anything. Afterwards, when I was awake, I touched my belly, I lightly touched my vagina too. I felt so light! I had gone beyond Babylon...]

Zuhra's oniric perception of "ugly, rusty tubes" insider her abdomen can be interpreted as a phallic allusion to the school custodian who raped her for years, leaving his unwelcome stains inside her belly. Yet, her description of the fear associated with touching the tubes could also refer to her own difficult relationship with her body, of feeling dirty and ashamed and of being burdened by the memory of the trauma. Perhaps the rusty, heavy, iron tubes represent Zuhra's sense of shame and negation of the positive aspects of her sexuality that she has suppressed, hidden inside her

belly, for so long, afraid to “touch it,” afraid to become a sexually mature individual capable of a joyful, healthy intimate relationship. At the end of the dream, Zuhra “expels” the rusty pipes, the fear/shame of her corporeal being, and declares that she is ready to go beyond horrific Babylon<sup>158</sup> to find love, in a place where “la mia vagina è felice e innamorata.” [“where my vagina is happy and in love.”] (Scego *Oltre* 449) The explicit reference to her vagina represents the newfound tranquility that she has found with her body, but also her desire to find a black man with whom she can fall in love: “Voglio innamorarmi di un uomo con il colore della mia pelle. [“I want to fall in love with a man who has the same skin color as me.”] (Scego *Oltre* 227) He must be a “fratello dell’epidermide” [“an epidermal brother”], who won’t make her feel “inadequate” or “exotic,” like the failed relationships she has had with white men in the past. (Scego *Oltre* 227) Demonstrating the transformed rapport she has with her body, the last image of the text returns full circle to Zuhra’s menstrual blood which opened the novel. Unlike in the Prologue where the protagonist abhors the sign of her period, wishing for menopause at age thirty, not even able to see the stains on her underwear, after expelling the “rusty pipes,” Zuhra can now perceive her menstruations as bright red, and she sees them as beautiful and symbolic of her adult femininity: “È rossa la sua stella. Un po’ umida. Ma bella. Emana luce. Una stella mestruale che brilla solo per lei...Dentro la costellazione, la sua storia di donna. E dentro la sua storia, quella di altre prima di lei e di altre dopo di lei...Tutte unite da un colore e da un affetto.” [“It’s red, her star. And a little wet. But beautiful. It emanates light. A menstrual star that shines only for her....Inside that constellation,

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<sup>158</sup> Zuhra explains the significance of Babylon as a phrase that she invented when she was miserable in high school, as she describes herself: “grassa, nera, scostante.” [“fat, black, awkward.”] (Scego *Oltre* 449) With a cultural reference to a Bob Dylan song, Zuhra says that Babylon represents “tutto quanto di peggio possa esistere al mondo. La feccia, il vomito, lo schifo, il dolore.” [“the worst possible stuff that can exist in the world. Feces, vomit, disgusting stuff, pain.”] (Scego *Oltre* 450) Perhaps the title *Oltre Babilonia* refers to her healing from the worst possible state of pain that she can imagine, the depression, panic attacks, bulimia, and loneliness that she suffered for more than a decade after being sexually violated as a child. For another reflection on Scego’s selection of the title *Oltre Babilonia* for her novel, see Simone Brioni, “The Somali Italian Borderland in *Oltre Babilonia*” (2015), pp. 130-132.

her story as a woman. And inside her story, another one of others before her and others after her...All united by a color and by affection.”] (Scego *Oltre* 456) The reappearance of the color *rosso*/red at the conclusion of *Oltre Babilonia*, the single missing shade in her “loss of colors,” indicates that Zuhra has overcome the decade of depression that she suffered as a survivor of child rape. The fact that she first perceives red specifically linked to her menstruations implies that a significant aspect of her healing occurs through the evolution in her relationship with her body: she has a more salutary perception of her corporeal self and her sexuality, thus, giving her the liberty to pursue love.

Yet, *Oltre Babilonia* is not only a rape narrative. The novel can also be read as a fictive “identity narrative.” American cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner put forth the “narrative identity thesis” in 1986 which has been reprinted as “Self-Making and World-Making” (2001). Bruner’s identity narrative hypothesis contends that identity is constructed via the stories that we tell about ourselves, both to ourselves and to others. He observes that the conceptualization of autobiography genre has significantly evolved in the last century: prior, it was viewed as writing about a true, “essential self,” a “life” in other words, particularly, a life which was an “exemplary and representative expression of the culture,” the so-called *Bildungsroman* genre. (Bruner 26) Bruner notes that the theorization of life narratives has been capsized since the turn of the last century, with the telling producing the subject, instead of the contrary: “We have come to reject the view that a ‘life’ is anything in itself and to believe that it is all in the constructing, in the text, or the text making.” (Bruner 27) He defines the genre of autobiography as:

A narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared

consciousness...(in order to accomplish this task) one needs a theory of growth or at least of transformation. (Bruner 27-28, my insertion)

Since the events narrated in an autobiography and the particulars of the transformation are “not verifiable” in an objective sense, the author/protagonist must rely on his/her own fallible memory and unique interpretation of his/her “life” to create his/her life narrative. (Bruner 28) Thus, instead of recounting the factual unfolding of a series of episodes in the existence of a laudable or at least unusual individual, an autobiography is, in reality, a “narrative invention” which allows us to explain ourselves to ourselves as well as to others; by extension, by storytelling, one creates oneself both for self and for the surrounding members of our culture. (Bruner 28-29) Bruner distinguishes between folk stories and autobiography in that the former confirms and reinforces societal “givens” by simply “mirroring...our culture.” Self-narrative, rather, relates a story that is “noncanonical,” that “runs counter to expectancy or produces an outcome that is counter to expectancy,” yet it must remain understandable in the context of the given culture. (Bruner 30) The hallmark feature of autobiography that furnishes its noncanonical feature, that is, its sense of specialness, exceptionality, or simply makes it interesting, is the marking of “turning points” in the story which Bruner defines as a “crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief, a conviction, or a thought.” (Bruner 31) Herein lies the construction of self via narrative, according to Bruner: if one defines “self” as “an enduring concept over time” as demonstrated by “a sense of commitment to a set of beliefs and values and values that we are unwilling (or unable) to submit to ‘radical’ scrutiny,”<sup>159</sup> then the “turning points” that the author/protagonist chooses to include reflect the “evaluative component” in autobiography. Hence, for the author, the construction of a self-narrative is rhetorical: by selecting, among a multitude of events, the worthwhile or representative

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<sup>159</sup> Here, Bruner adopts Charles Taylor’s conceptualization of “Self” (1989). See C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989.



episodes that one relates in a life story, the author demonstrates his/her “commitment to a certain set of presuppositions about oneself, one’s relation to others, one’s view of the world and one’s place in it,” thereby, creating self via the fabrication of the narrative itself, what is worth telling. (Bruner 35) According to Bruner, one’s “life” or “self” resides in the symbols via which one builds/tells it which seems to be a uniquely human quality.<sup>160</sup> Psychologists Medved and Brockmeier (2010) collocate the narrative ability of human beings to the unique neurological wiring in the human brain: citing research on split-brain patients, in which the corpus callosum that connects the right and left sides of the brain has been severed by trauma or a disease process, they observe that the left hemisphere of the brain serves as an “interpreter” who “seeks explanations for internal and external events and, in so doing, constructs intelligible and coherent narratives about these occurrences.” (Medved and Brockmeier 18) Thus, there is no “biological” or soul-based self; citing neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga’s research, they assert that the “self is the product of stories we tell about ourselves.”<sup>161</sup> (Medved and Brockmeier 18)

Yet, how does cognitive psychology’s narrative identity thesis, the creation of self through storytelling about oneself, relate to Zuhra’s story in Igiaba Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia*? The novel in its entirety cannot be framed as an autobiography since it is not the story of Scego’s “life,” but from the point of view of Zuhra, what she relates in *Oltre Babilonia* is her life narrative: she begins with her childhood when she was raped, an important “turning point” in her identity under Bruner’s model, and continues with the physical and psychological consequences that she suffered from for

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<sup>160</sup> Bruner notes that storytelling about self begins at a very early age, shortly after a year of life. As evidence, he cites Katherine Nelson’s recording of an eighteen-month old baby’s “after-bedtime soliloquies.” The greater part of them are autobiographical. See K. Nelson, *Narratives from the Crib*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989.

<sup>161</sup> Medved and Brockmeier support these assertions by citing the research of psychologist and neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga. See his *The Mind’s Past*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1998.

more than two decades. Yet, Zuhra's story is not only the product of a therapeutic expressive writing exercise, in other words, it does not recount only her trauma narrative. Zuhra relates several other significant themes via what can be called "nuclear episodes" in her life story:<sup>162</sup> Zuhra's self-narrative returns frequently to her relationship with her beloved mother who has suffered greatly from losing her family of origin during Italian colonialism and from her solitude in Italia as a member of the Somalian diaspora; even so, Zuhra also recognizes the role that her mother's depression and alcoholism played in her being sexually violated. Another recurring theme in Zuhra's life narrative is growing up without a father and knows nothing about him: "Mamma di papà non parla mai." ["Mom never talks about dad."] (Scego *Oltre* 41) Moreover, there is an omnipresent void in her knowledge of her family history: of her parents' youth in Somalia, their courtship, their marriage, and what led to her father's abandonment of the family. Zuhra queries her mother: "Ti è mai piaciuto fare l'amore con gli uomini... con papà? Ti divertivi?... Non dire *eeb* (vergogna), non dire quella parola lì ti prego... Rispondimi e basta, mamma, ti prego, ne ho bisogno." ["Did you every like making love with men... with daddy? Did you like it?... Don't say *eeb* (shame), don't say that word, I'm begging you.... Respond to me and that's all, mom, I'm begging you, I need to know."] (Scego *Oltre* 56, my insertion) Lastly, Zuhra returns frequently in her life narrative to the *topos* of her marginalization as a Black female of Somalian origins in Italy which confounds her ability to construct a coherent, affirmative sense of self. Significantly, the Epilogue of the novel/Zuhra's life narrative addresses all of these themes and presents their resolution which signifies the solidification of Zuhra's identity. Importantly, she initiates the last

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<sup>162</sup> Waters and Fivush's "Relations Between Narrative Coherence, Identity, and Psychological Well-Being in Emerging Adulthood" (2015) define "nuclear episodes" in an autobiographical narrative as "single, unique events happening in one time and place (that) were critical in the development of psychological functioning and well-being," thus, in creating one's identity. They employ the term with a similar significance of Bruner's "turning points." Waters and Fivush credit the term "nuclear episodes" to D. McAdams in his *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*, New York, Guilford Press, 1985.

chapter, which represents the resolution of her identity crisis, with an explication of her intimate relationship with both Somalian and Italian languages: she recognizes both of them as her “lingua madre” [“mother tongue”], as well as her “madre” [“mother”]. (Scego *Oltre* 443) Zuhra’s employment of the term “mother” as a synonym for language in the concluding chapter of her life story is noteworthy. It would imply that both tongues, Somali and Italian, have given birth to her and, thus are equally powerful and relevant in generating her sense of self. Zuhra clarifies, however, that her two “mothers” beget different aspects of her identity: Somali is “la lingua che ci (io e la mamma) riunisce” [“the language that unites us (me and my mother)”], the language that she heard in the womb, and in which she had her first dreams. The oral aspect of Somali is important for Zuhra as well: “Il somalo di mamma è orale, il suo somalo è fatto di storia, poesia, musica e canto.” [“The Somali of my mom is oral, her Somali is made up of history, poetry, music, and song.”] (Scego *Oltre* 443-444) Thus, Somali represents her ties to her mother (and her father whom she has never known) and, therefore, her mother’s origins, culture, and homeland. Moreover, Somali language represents history for Zuhra, relayed to her by her mother in the form of audiocassette recordings. The oral history she receives from her mother has a double significance, both of which are critical for Zuhra’s identity formation: first, the role that History played in the “turning points” of her larger genealogy, the story of her family which has always been a mystery to her: how Italy’s colonialism in Somalia deprived Maryam of her own parents and, later, how she as a young wife with a new baby daughter was forced to flee her native land with her husband who was being hunted down by Siad Barre’s dictatorship. History played a salient role, as well, in her father’s, Elias’, family of origin: his own family of origin was destroyed by his parents being brutally raped by Italian and German soldiers during Afis, Italy’s Trusteeship Administration of Somalia. Secondly, Maryam relates lowercase history to Zuhra, that is, she fills

in the void of family history, “per mettere insieme questi frammenti di noi.” [“to put together the fragments of us.”] (Scego *Oltre* 102) Maryam records her experiences as a young girl in Somalia for Zuhra in order to share a pre-alcoholic, pre-depressed, as she puts it, “una versione migliore” [“a better version”] of herself which includes her story as an intelligent, hopeful, young Somalian girl and her tender love story with her husband, Elias, Zuhra’s father: “Un ragazzo era entrato nel cuore di una ragazza. Una storia romantica. Fatta di sguardi e carezze.” [“A boy had entered into the heart of a girl. A romantic story. Made of gazes and caresses.”] (Scego *Oltre* 347) Likewise, with the caresses of her voice, the caresses that she realizes that she had never given her daughter owing to her alcoholism and depression, Maryam wants to demonstrate to Zuhra that not all men are rapists or dangerous predatorial animals, nor are they all absent fathers, and that it is worth it to fall in love:

Maryam parlava al suo registratore. Attraverso di esso abbracciava la figlia Zuhra. Le storie erano il suo amore di madre che lei, Maryam Laamane, non era riuscita a manifestare... Voleva spiegare alla figlia ogni dettaglio di quel suo amore splendido. Voleva dire a Zuhra che, nonostante l’amarezza dopo, valeva la pena di scommettere su quel sentimento. Voleva convincere la figlia oltraggiata per sua disattenzione che gli uomini, se presi nei momenti giusti, potevano diventare tra le creature le più meravigliose. (Scego *Oltre* 426)

[Maryam talked to her tape-recorder. Through it, she embraced her daughter, Zuhra. These stories were the motherly love that she, Maryam Laamane, had not been able to display... She wanted to explain to her daughter every detail of her splendid love story. She wanted to tell Zuhra that, notwithstanding the bitterness afterwards, it had been worth it to gamble on that sentiment. She wanted to convince her daughter, who had been violated due to her negligence, that men if found in the right moment could become the most marvelous creatures on earth.]

Through relating the love story between herself and Zuhra’s father, Maryam furnishes an alternative, edifying portrait to her daughter of her parents, a missing family history which signified a void in Zuhra’s own identity. Moreover, the story of the tender romance between Maryam and Elias provides hope and a healthy model for her daughter’s future rapport with her own partner/husband. Maryam hopes that narrating to her daughter the love between her parents

will be significant in her daughter's healing from being raped: "Quella figlia era stata ferita. Qualcuno, senza permesso, aveva violato l'intimità di Zuhra...Maryam Laamane questo non riusciva a perdonarselo... 'Allah *Karim*, risparmia a questa ragazza la mancanza d'amore.'" ["That daughter had been wounded. Someone, without permission, had violated the intimacy of Zuhra...Maryam Laamane wasn't able to forgive herself for this... 'God *Karim*, save this girl from a lack of love.']\*] (Scego *Oltre* 348) Therefore, Maryam's and Elias' stories and their encounters with History, as well as that of their parents, have impacted their relationship with her and are significant to Zuhra's identity, as well as her healing from childhood sexual abuse and depression: her mother's and father's life stories provide Zuhra with a richer sense of self and a more positive and complex view of her parents than as merely an alcoholic, neglectful mother and an absentee father and husband. In point of fact, psychologists Medved and Brockmeier argue that family storytelling, handing down the family history, results in stronger children with a more solid identity:

...adults who are able to tell coherent stories about their childhood experiences, no matter how troubled or traumatic these might have been, have children who develop into psychologically healthier adults...the underlying assumption of this literature is that if peoples' autobiographical narratives are incoherent, their sense of self is also incoherent."<sup>163</sup> (Medved and Brockmeier 19)

Likewise, Jerome Bruner confirms that the "self-making" that we accomplish through the storytelling about ourselves is inter-subjective, that is, highly dependent on others and their interpretations and evaluations of the self we create. Bruner notes that, while Western ideology privileges individuality with a sense of self as the "most 'private' aspect of our being," from his analysis of the dozens of autobiographies that he has gathered, life stories are highly influenced by

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<sup>163</sup> Medved and Brockmeier cite the study of M. Main (1991) to support these assertions. See Main, M. "Metacognitive Knowledge, Metacognitive Monitoring, and Singular (Coherent) vs. Multiple (Incoherent) Model of Attachment: Findings and Directions for Future Research" in *Attachment Across the Life Cycle*, edited by C.M. Parkes et al., London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 127-159.

our referent groups, particularly the family, their values, and their stories. (Bruner 34-35) Hence, Maryam's and Elias' life narratives are fundamental for the creation of Zuhra's life story and, by extension, her sense of self.

Nonetheless, Zuhra's "autobiographical narrative" diverges from that of her parents in that she has another "mother," the Italian language, therefore, by extension Italian culture, and Italy itself which she makes evident in the conclusion/the Prologue of her own life narrative:

Ma poi...in ogni discorso, parola, sospiro, fa capolino l'altra madre. Quella che ha allattato Dante, Boccaccio, De André e Alda Merini. L'italiano con cui sono cresciuta...L'italiano aceto dei mercati rionali, l'italiano dolce degli speaker radiotelefonici, l'italiano serio delle lezioni magistrali. L'italiano che scrivo. Non saprei scegliere nessun'altra lingua per scrivere, per tirare fuori l'anima. (Scego *Oltre* 444)

[But then...in every discourse, word, sigh, the other mother peeks out. The one that nursed Dante, Boccaccio, De André and Alda Merini. The Italian with which I grew up...The vinegary Italian of neighborhood markets, the sweet Italian of radio newscasters, the serious Italian of university lessons. The Italian that I write. I wouldn't know how to choose any other language to write in, to pull out my soul.]

Although her relationship with Italian is conflictual—"mi faceva sentire straniera" ["it made me feel like a foreigner"]—Zuhra is clear that her own personal intellectual formation, the reality of the culture that she has grown up with and now loves and holds as her own, the language with which she writes, thus, the language by which she creates her sense of self is Italian. At the conclusion of *Oltre Babilonia*, Zuhra's resolved, mixed, complex identity is demonstrated by the nickname that she confers on herself: "Negropolitana" reflects her decisively Roman and Italian identity, yet also her Black (female) and Somalian one, an identity that represents both of her "mothers." "Negro" refers to both race which marks her as a stranger in Italy with its cultural and racial nationalism, but "Negro" also refers to her parents and the strength, knowledge of self, and love they confer to her with their stories, notwithstanding their defects. "Politana" brings to mind "metropolitana," the term for the subway in Rome, which confers her sense of Roman-ness. Yet,

“politana” also sounds like “metropoli” with its origins in the Greek *mētēr* for “mother” and *pólis* for “city,” therefore, “città madre” or “mother city.”<sup>164</sup> Therefore, Zuhra as “Negropolitana” asserts both her identity as a Black, Italian woman in Rome as well as her right to belong. Through telling her life story which is not only a rape trauma narrative, Zuhra has accomplished creating an affirmative identity for herself, yet one that is also inter-subjective, that links her with other stories, those of her parents and the generations that will follow:

Che nostalgia mi avevano risvegliato quelle audiocassette (le storie registrate da Maryam)...Mi dava (la cassetta/la voce registrata) l'idea di sicurezza, anche di amore, stranamente...“Una volta, figlia mia, mi hai chiesto se con papà era stato bello.” Trattengo il fiato. “Non ti ho saputo rispondere. Non saprei nemmeno dirti bene come sia andata la faccenda tra me e lui, a dir la verità. Però in queste cassette c'è una risposta. Una delle tante possibili.” Una risposta? Un tentativo? Sto tremando. Sfioro le cassette con il mio piccolo indice inanellato. “C'è papà qui dentro?” chiedo. “Ci siamo noi” disse Maryam Laamane. Noi...che parola meravigliosa. (Scego *Oltre* 451, my insertions)

[What nostalgia those cassette tapes had awakened in me (Maryam's recorded stories)...It gave me (the cassette/the recorded voice) a sense of security, also of love, strangely...“One time, my daughter, you asked me if being with your father was beautiful.” I hold my breath. “I didn't know how to respond to you. I wouldn't even know how to tell you what happened between us, to tell the truth. But in these cassette tapes, there's an answer. One of many possible ones.” An answer? An attempt (at one)? I'm trembling. I brush the cassettes lightly with my little, ringed index-finger. “Is daddy inside here?” I ask. “We're there,” said Maryam Laamane. Us...what a marvelous word.]

Through her own selection of the “nuclear episodes” of her childhood and her love story with Elias, Maryam creates with her recorded voice a greatly needed sense of family and family history for her daughter, the missing pieces in Zuhra's own story, thus, in her identity. Through her storytelling, Maryam crafts their family, which includes Zuhra's father and the three of them together as a family. Returning to feminist theorist Michelle Wright's archetype of the Black mother as a critical reference point for construction of identity in the Black female Other, Zuhra's

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<sup>164</sup> Zingarelli, Nicola. *Lo Zingarelli 2014: Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*. 12<sup>th</sup> ed. Pioltello, Rotolito Lombarda Editors, 2013.

Black Somalian mother, although imperfect, shares blood bonds, family history, and similar positionality with her daughter. This allows the two of them to reciprocally create a sense of self and subjectivity which is evidenced by her mother's resolve to heal herself from alcoholism and depression and prioritize her relationship with her daughter, and Zuhra's strength in, notwithstanding the unspeakable traumas that were perpetrated on her body as a small child, her decision to be open to love. As Zuhra confirms, her mother's words, thus, her mother's story and her mother herself establish "l'idea di sicurezza, anche d'amore" ["a sense of security, also of love"], fundamental foundations for Zuhra's identity as a Black Italian and also as a sexually mature woman who is no longer defined by being a rape trauma victim.



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